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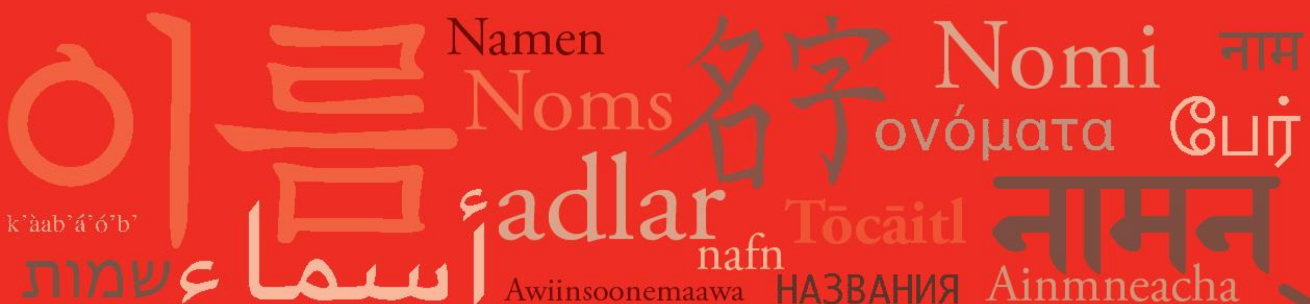

Book Review

Empty Signs, Historical Imaginaries: The Entangled Nationalization of Names and Naming in A Late Habsburg Borderland. ÁGOSTON BERECZ. New York: Berghahn Books. 2020. Pp. 335 (Hardback). $149.00. ISBN 13: 978-1789-206340.

In 1996, Berghahn Books began a special series in cooperation with the Center for Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota. Devoted to "Austrian and Habsburg Studies", this dynamic scholarly series has produced 34 outstanding volumes of scholarship since its inauguration. The book under review is the 27th volume in the series, written by Dr. Ágoston Berecz, a Max Weber Fellow at the Department of History and Civilization of the European University Institute. Before being awarded a doctorate in comparative history from the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, Dr. Berecz earned a degree in Hungarian philology at Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University and worked as a freelance translator. Alongside his native language of Hungarian, his language background includes English, French, Romanian, German, Spanish, and Italian. For the book under review, Berecz combines that impressive multilingual background with his expertise in comparative history to offer readers an extraordinary piece of scholarship. This work represents years of meticulous archival research. To be sure, this personal investment was not in vain.

This reference is without exaggeration a triumph of historical socio-onomastic research which will no doubt make a lasting and significant contribution to an impressive variety of academic disciplines. From German Studies to Historical Linguistics, Sociology and Onomastics, this work exemplifies the interdisciplinary power of names studies. Nevertheless, it is imperative to stress that this work is by no means appropriate for the lay reader who has a passing interest in names and naming. To be sure, the factual density of this investigation combined with the pre-requisite expertise it demands in European history and languages make

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this intelligently written treatise singularly appropriate for specialists in the field. Indeed, if there is one overarching criticism that can be made of this reference, aside from the occasional grammatical error, it is simply that there are times when the development of the argumentation becomes temporarily lost in the abundance of historical minutia presented. For interested researchers, however, the sheer density of the archival details Berecz presents makes this reference an invaluable piece of scholarship. This geographical spotlight of this highly specialized work is what Berecz calls the "Habsburg borderland": the area of Transylvania encompassing the "Kingdom of Hungary whose population was composed of Romanians, Magyaras, Germans, Szeklers, and various smaller minorities" (Heppner 2020, 350).

The acumen with which this work was conceived is demonstrated in its intelligent organizational structure. The investigation is divided into three fairly equally sized parts—each one devoted to a different investigatory focal point. As Berecz explains in the introduction, this tripartite division reflects "the three levels of analysis undertaken". (19) Part I (25–88), entitled "Peasants", is devoted to exploring the "mostly illiterate peasantry's concepts practices and attitudes related to names and naming" within the historical context of Austro-Hungarian nation-building. With that goal in mind, Part I is composed of three chapters. Chapter 1 (25–53) provides background information on the multilingual onomastic landscape shaped by the Romanians, Magyars/Hungarian, and Saxons in the multiethnic region of 19th century Habsburg Empire.[1] Chapter 2 (54–70) concentrates on the socio-political complexities of contrasting official and vernacular personal names within this geopolitical context. As Berecz points, in many cases, the onomastic heterogeneity of the multiethnic multilingual population was further compounded by the tendency of individuals to hold multiple personal names both sequentially and simultaneously. Chapter 3 (71–88) also addresses the onomastic diversity endemic to this region but shifts the focus from anthroponyms to toponyms. To do this, Berecz's examination concentrates on comparing and contrasting exonymic and endonymic microtoponyms as recorded not only in his own data compilations, but also historical surveys, many of which remain unpublished. An excellent example here is Frigyes Pesty's 19th toponymic surveys of Székely Land and Bihar County in present-day Romania and Hungary, respectively.

Berecz's decision to extend his examination to include place names and naming significantly elevates the scholarly merit of this already extraordinary piece of academic research into the interaction between naming and nation-building. As Berecz rightly explains, ultimately:

> [t]he concept of place does not refer to a physically pre-existent given, but to a space delimited and invested with meanings by humans. Places are created and sustained by linguistic practices, chief among them naming and the use of place names (71).

That being the case, by investigating the names that are variously given to places which carry sociocultural significance for the collective identity of a group, critical insights may be won into the development of ethnic, linguistic, and national group identities. With this third chapter, the book moves its focus from the plebeian to the privileged.

In many ways, the organization of Part II (89–258) cleverly mirrors that already presented in Part I. Accordingly, the first of the three chapters in Part II lays much of the sociohistorical groundwork for the other two in this section. In Chapter 4 (89–107), readers are provided considerable background information about the upper-class members of the Empire and the inter- and intragroup tensions over personal names and ethnic origins. Particularly interesting in this chapter are the numerous historical examples of leading intellectuals who elected to modify the spelling of their names to match their political ideals or professional goals. For example, Berecz describes how the Moldavian writer *Mihai(l) Emin**ovici*** (1850-1889) elected to alter his family name to *Emin**escu*** at the age of 16, upon the advice of a prominent editor.[2] Berecz simply describes Eminescu as a "budding poet from the Bukovino" (99). However, as many readers will know, that very same young man would grow up to become one of the most celebrated writers of Romania and Moldova.[2] However, what some readers might not be familiar with is Eminescu's anti-Semitism. According to Ioanid (1996), Eminescu reportedly advocated for "the death sentence for people who conspired in the Alliance Israelite". (228).[3]

Generally speaking, Berecz's failure to spend more time addressing the impact of Anti-Semitism on the onomastic policies of the Habsburg borderlands is truly regrettable.[4] Certainly, based on some of the documentary evidence which Berecz himself presents, deep-seated prejudices against Jewish residents played a not insignificant role in the development, implementation, and reception of European naming policies. For instance, when presenting Romanian nationalists' negative reactions to magyarization[5] policies, Berecz provides the following quotation from a 1867 publication:

> Doesn't the ear-locked Tekles know that you can call a spade a digging tool, but it remains a spade? Doesn't he and those who pay for his foul job of magyarizing know that a Jew will remain a Jew[6] even if he takes on a name like Hunyadi or Légrády? (111).

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The “Telkes” addressed in the above lambast is Simon Telkes (1845–1933), President of the Central Association for Name Magyarization [Központi Névmagyarosító Társaság]. According to Telkes and his supporters, onomastic assimilation was key to creating a unified national identity, free of inter-ethnic conflicts and rivalries. In his opinion, magyarization was especially beneficial to Jewish residents and other religious minorities who had been historically ostracized. By adopting traditional Hungarian names, they could publicly declare their allegiance to the Hungarian nation-state and thereby achieve wider acceptance by the surrounding community. As he wrote:

> Just as baptism is the pre-requisite to becoming a member of the Christian community, so too is maygarization of foreign names the first step towards being welcomed as a Hungarian, a true son of the nation. In fact, from a social and national point of view, this patriotic declaration is even more important than baptism [. . .] because maygarization converts a foreign family name into a Hungarian family name and thereby strengthens the trust we have in one another. In short, the maygarization of family names has a crucial ethical role to play with regard to our national unity. The Hungarian name is, so to speak, the **political declaration** of allegiance to Hungary. (Telkes 1898, 3 from Maitz & Farkas 2015, 179; emphasis in the original)[7]

More than a decade earlier, Telkes had put his theory of assimilation into practice. In 1881, to mark his conversion from Judaism to Christianity, he officially changed his surname from *Rubin* to *Telkes*. Telkes was certainly not alone in his sociopolitical act of onomastic assimilation. As research has shown, the 18th and 19th centuries were “the Golden Age of Name Magyarization” (Farkas 2012) in the Hapsburg Empire. During this time, a significant proportion of the Jewish community elected to alter their names in hopes of escaping widespread anti-Semitism (Farkas 2012, 2015; Maitz & Farkas 2015). However, as the above-mentioned passage from Berecz’s book demonstrates, the promise of social acceptance was all too frequently denied. Unfortunately, Berecz’s spends comparatively little time discussing the role that anti-Semitism played in the making of onomastic policies and the construction of national identity. It is understood, of course, that no work can be truly exhaustive. However, the relative omission of this crucial historical factor is still disappointing.[8] A perfect place to have done so would have been Chapter 5 (108–125), where Berecz focusses his attention on the magyarization of family-names.

Importantly, as Berecz stresses, the decision to magyarize a family name was not purely a question of choice. In fact, many people, even those who were not members of religious minorities, were (in)directly forced to onomastically conform.[9] Compelling evidence of this external coercion can be seen in Berecz’s empirical data. During his prodigious archival search, he was able to locate 1,782 cases involving the Magyarization of Romanian family names between the years 1867 and 1913. As Berecz’s research shows, in 1897, the number of name changes experiences a sudden spike from ca. 100 cases to 2.5 times that amount. Then, just two years later in 1889, the number of magyarized surnames plummets, just as abruptly as it had risen. According to Berecz, this dramatic increase and decrease corresponds to the introduction of a nationalist state-sponsored campaign which called on public employees to identify with and as a Magyar. As shown in Chapter 6 (126-158), governmental attempts to politicize names and naming was by no means limited to anthroponymy but also included toponyms, which Berecz brilliantly refers to as identity “signposts over the land” (126). Then as now, the policy-makers who were invested with the power to develop and implement nationalist (re)naming policies were rarely educated in onomastics or linguistics. Consequently, their policies were seldomly based upon scientific facts. Following this line of argumentation, at the end of Chapter 6, Berecz turns his full attention to the impact of governmental intervention.

Part III (159–273), also composed of three chapters, begins with Chapter 7 and its detailed examination of state regulations imposed on first names in the Habsburg Empire. Then, in Chater 8 (177–192), Berecz examines the proliferation of governmental efforts to regulate the spelling of residents’ personal names. Granted, readers without a solid foundation in the phonology and orthography of Romanian, Hungarian, and German may find the details in this chapter to be an obstacle to their comprehension and/or an impediment to their reading enjoyment. However, the historical anecdotes which Berecz sprinkles throughout this chapter serve as ample reward for the intrepid reader. An excellent example here comes in the sub-section entitled “Magyars Write Romanian Family Names” (180–188). Here Berecz vividly describes the veritable temper tantrum a school headmaster throws, when two of his favorite students come to him with a complaint: their recently acquired diplomas feature Hungarian spellings of the Romanian surnames. Horrified by their apparent lack of patriotism, the headmaster explodes: “You treacherous snakes!” he reported yelled “I have cherished and nursed you in my bosom for eight years, and now, you are proving yourselves to be some venomous Vlachs, enemies of the Hungarian nation!” (185). Berecz’s frequent use of such memorable anecdotes helps to illustrate the real-world consequences of the language policies detailed in his treatise.

The same compliment can be made for the third and final segment of Part III. Entitled “The Grand Toponymic Manoeuvre”, Chapter 9 (193–258) examines the toponymic policies initiated by officials to mediate the ethnolinguistic dimension of nation-building. What is especially intriguing in this chapter is not so much

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the litany of place-naming policies enacted by high-up officials. This issue, though important, is one which has been addressed many times in other publications (for example, Gammerl 2018; Varga 2016; Vermes 2014; Evans 2006). Instead, what is far more interesting are the cases of administrative misconduct presented throughout this narrative. Thanks to his dogged detective work, Berecz uncovered a number of clandestine (re)naming campaigns waged by local authorities. In the segment entitled "The Reaction of Local Government" (225–229), for example, Berecz tells the story of a county official who, despite the protests of the local council, renamed a village in Székás. The name he selected was *Arankafalva* which translates into 'Aranka's village'. The inspiration for the naming was apparently the official's wife whose first name was *Aranka* (226). Though admittedly romantic, the administrator's decision to impose his own personal will upon an entire community is remarkable. Such examples serve as excellent illustrations of the omnipotence and fickleness that public officials displayed in the implementation of governmental place-naming policies. Such inconsistencies helped to explain the lack of regional uniformity in the implementation of the Empire's program to magyarize place-names.

Here again, Berecz's meticulous documentation offers the reader compelling empirical evidence. Through his painstaking search of the archival records, Berecz uncovered 3,684 cases of official toponymic changes in nineteen different counties of the Empire. As Berecz's research uncovers, there was tremendous regional variation in proportion of name changes involving Magyarization. For instance, in the western neighboring counties of Krassó-Szörény, Arad, and Temes the percentage of Magyarized toponyms relative to the total region number of place-name changes were 64.74%, 52.75%, and 45.33%, respectively. By comparison, in the counties of Brassó, Csík, and Udvarhely, none of the recorded place-name changes reportedly involved Magyarization.[10] As Berecz explains, such stark regional differences were not simply an issue of geographical location, but also a manifestation of differing ethnolinguistic demographies and contrasting political realities. Thus, as Berecz cogently observes at the end of this chapter, toponyms are always significant, sometimes "painful reminders of who hold legitimate power and the right to define" (241).

The last segment of the book is simply labelled "Conclusions" (259–273). Thankfully for readers, Berecz resists the temptation of simply repeating everything written before. Rather he provides a carefully crafted concise synopsis of the most important insights reached and addresses the research questions posed at the very start of the volume. In this way, the issues raised in the "Introduction" (1–24) are elegantly and effectively bookended by the discussion provided in Berecz's "Conclusions" (259–273). However, the book does not end there. In the final pages of the book, Berecz offers readers an appendix filled with a series of extremely useful tables. For example, Table A.1 (274–275) presents a listing of endonyms with standardized and non-spellings in three different languages: Romanian, Hungarian, and German. In Table A.3 (276–277), Berecz presents a detailed listing of Romanian first names with the Hungarian equivalents 19th century officials used during the Magyarization process. The multilingual place-name index given in Appendix B (279–289) also provides considerable assistance in navigating the onomastic labyrinth of this complex epoch and region. In the bibliography (291–328), Berecz offers not only a complete listing of all publications he consulted, but also the many archives, databases, maps, etc. he used as well. This information serves as an excellent roadmap to other scientists seeking to explore the criss-crossing fields of onomastic policy, identity-formation, and nation-building.

Of course, it is well-understood that this publication will most likely only be read by a comparatively small share of today's book market. Even within the field of onomastics, this work may still be considered rather niche. However, it must be stressed that the potential scholarly merit of this extends far beyond the borderlands of the Habsburg Empire. For reason, one can only hope that this publication finds its way onto scholars' bookshelves far and wide. This is a book that deserves to be read and read broadly. If for no other reason, Berecz's work serves as a powerful reminder to the next generation of scholar: there is still so much more waiting to be discovered in the dust-covered paper files of the world's historical archives.

Notes

[1] As Judson explains, this territory was known by several different names. Alongside Habsburg Empire, the name Habsburg Monarchy is sometimes used. During the 19th century, until 1867, "the state was known as the Austrian Empire [. . . and afterwards] Austria-Hungary" (ix). For two outstanding historical examinations, see Judson 2016; and Mitchel, 2018.

[2] Brezianu & Spânu (2007), for example, describe as "the national poet" of both nations (137).

[3] For more on Anti-semitism and Eminescu see, Brustein 2003; Mihok & Levy 2005).

[4] On that note, it is also a shame that more care wasn't invested in editing the text to avoid causing offense. While the description of Jews as "mercurial " (261), for example, was disturbing; the repeated and unexplained juxtaposition of "giants and Jews" (81, 264) was just downright odd.

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[5] Explained briefly, within this work, this term refers to the process of exchanging non-Hungarian for Hungarian onomastic elements. For this reason, this development is sometimes referred to as "Hungarianization". In the case of Berecz's investigation, the use of "Magyarization" is particularly effective as it immediately calls to mind the Hungarian autonym *Magyr* and thereby underscores the role that identity-shaping has historically played in this assimilation process.

[6] The argument that a name-change can't alter an individual's "true" identity was taken up by the National Socialists to argue against long-standing legislation that permitted Jewish residents to altering their names (Rennick 1970; Nick 2019;). As infamous anti-Semite Julius Streicher proclaimed in his terrorist publication "Der Stürmer", permitting Jewish residents to alter their names was not only nonsensical as it did nothing to alter their true nefarious nature. Such name-changes, in his hate-filled world, also represented an acute security risk as it enabled Jewish residents to remain undetected. For more on Streicher, National Socialism, and Name Change Policies in Nazi Germany, see Nick 2022. There is more than a degree of tragic irony that just after Simon Tekles' death in 1932/33, the Nazis began erecting the first concentration camps. For a map of the early camps, see United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's online "Holocaust Encyclopedia" (https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/nazi-concentration-camps-1933-34).

[7] A German version of Tekles's original Hungarian text appears in Maitz & Farkas 2015, 179. This review provides an English version of that translation for *NAMES* readers.

[8] During what Farkas (2012) calls the "Golden Age of Name Magyarization", name-changing was widespread throughout the Empire. Thus, although Jewish residents took part in this development in large numbers, they certainly were not the only ones to participate. As Viragh (2014) explains, it is therefore important "not overlook the fact that Jews were not the only ones changing their names: and that this was a general social phenomenon, in which Jews also participated, as regular members of society" (27).

[9] It is important to note that these percentages are based on the frequency data presented in table 9.1 (213). However, to facilitate between-group comparisons, this raw data was used to calculate the percentage of toponymic changes involving Magyarization amongst the total number of place-name changes within each county reported.

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