



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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John C. Swanson
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"A People with Two Souls": The Dual Identity of the Germans in Hungary, 1918-1944

Topic of Research: My research project focuses on the ethnic identity of the Hungarian-Germans, the German minority in Hungary, during the twentieth century, especially between the two World Wars. I spent the academic year 2001-2002 in Hungary working on this project thanks to a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Fellowship and an IREX IARO Grant. My main conclusion is that a sense of "German minority" in Hungary was created, or one could argue "imagined," during the interwar years.

Relevance and Contribution to Field: When I first started this project on the Hungarian-Germans, I was fascinated by the idea of a dual identity, which had become the catch-phrase of this ethnic minority in Hungary. I read the literature about Jakob Bleyer, the major figure of the Hungarian-Germans after World War I, until his death in 1933, and I read a great deal of Bleyer's own writings, especially his articles in the German-language newspaper, *Das Sonntagsblatt*. Bleyer always talked about the dual identity of the Hungarian-Germans: the idea that they were loyal to their sense of German Volk and to their Hungarian Vaterland or Hungarian Nation. Like a person, a German-Hungarian had a mother and a father, more precisely a Mutterland (Germany) and a Vaterland (Hungary). Gustav Gratz, another major figure among the Hungarian-Germans

in the interwar years, once stated that the Hungarian-Germans have two souls: German and Hungarian.

This idea is fascinating, not only for historians, but also for politicians. Somehow the German minority in Hungary had combined its sense of minority ethnic identity with a sense of Hungarian civic identity. This not only differed from many other ethnic groups in Central and Eastern Europe, but it could be an example of a healthy relationship between a minority and a nation-state, in which it lives. But for this to happen, it has to be true that the Hungarian-Germans had a dual identity. My research this year has proven to me that the situation, that is the “ethnic identity” of the Hungarian Germans, is much more complicated and much more nuanced. Also, the overused dichotomy of civic and ethnic nationalism is in many ways too black and white. My work on the example of the Ethnic Germany minority in Hungary will enhance future discussions on ethnicity and nationalism as well as help us rethink our views of national and ethnic minorities today.

Approach and Methodology: I am approaching this project and trying to answer my questions as a historian, even though sometimes I find that the basic question of “ethnic identity” seems to be a question of anthropologists, Volkskundler, sociologists, or psychologists. But one interesting thing that I think a historian can add to this discussion is a historical perspective, since these other disciplines often focus exclusively on the present. A historian studying questions of nationness and ethnicity can also add new viewpoints and suggest new types of documents compared to the other disciplines.

Theoretically, I began this project from the perspective of “nationalism” and “nationness.” I was very influenced by the work of Rogers Brubaker, especially his suggestion that nationness needs to be seen as the interplay of a triadic nexus of 1. nationalizing state; 2. national minority; and 3. homeland nationalism. I had hoped to focus on the Hungarian-Germans, a national minority, as part of this triad and examine the interaction between it and the other angles of the triangle. I have decided, however, that this perspective, even though fascinating and useful, is perhaps too simplistic. Another conclusion that I have come to is that the concepts of nation, nationalism, ethnic group, etc. are always in flux; they are always changing. To talk simply of a “national minority” is too simplistic.

Research Sites:

Hungarian National Archives, Budapest, Hungary
 Baranya County Archives, Pécs, Hungary
 Tolna County Archives, Szekszárd, Hungary
 Széchényi National Library, Budapest, Hungary
 German Foreign Ministry Archives, Berlin, Germany
 Institute for Danubian-Swabian history, Tübingen, Germany

Research Findings: Since I believe that the category of the “German minority” is not eternal and that it is always changing, the focus of my work has been “minority-building.” How and especially when was the German minority created and what did it mean to different people and levels of society.

My first question of “who are the Hungarian-Germans?” has led to the question of “how and when was a German minority or Hungarian-German minority created in Hungary?” It is very interesting that there is little or no literature on minority-building, as opposed to the vast literature on nation-building. In the big picture I see the sense of minority-building on four levels. (I borrow some of this framework from Brubaker’s triad.) First of all, there is the state, nation-state level, that is the state in which the minority lives and its view of the minority. Second, there is the homeland level, that is the interest of the minority’s supposed homeland in the minority. Third, there is the level of the leadership of the minority, which has to be separated from the fourth level: the interest of the majority of the ethnic group, which for the Hungarian-Germans is the peasants.

There is quite a bit of literature on the state level, that is what was the Hungarian government’s policy vis-à-vis the Hungarian-Germans. There has also been work on Germany’s interest in the Germans of the East, especially Nazi Germany’s interest. There are also studies of what the leadership of the Hungarian-Germans hoped to create, specifically what Jakob Bleyer wanted the “German minority” to be. Of course, the most interesting level on which a minority is created is that of the minority itself, but this is also the most difficult to decipher.

Standard documents, that is political documents, can be useful in understanding what the Hungarian-German peasants—the fourth level—wanted and how they saw themselves. In addition to newspapers and Heimatbücher, there is also the work of Volkskundler from the interwar period that can shed light on the sense of Germanness, Hungarianness, Schwabness or something else that existed in the villages. It is true that the work of German Volkskundler, such as Rudolf Hartmann, were written using the idea of Sprachinselforschung, that is the desire to see German speaking villages as closed areas where 18th century “Germanness” had been preserved. This has to be viewed with a critical eye, especially since the work of Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann after the Second World War on Interethnik, that is intercultural relations between ethnic groups. I would argue that Sprachinselforschung and Interethnik are not mutually exclusive. Of course, the German-language villages west of Budapest were much more an example of interethnik than perhaps the more-closed villages of southern Hungary.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas: My research on the ethnic identity of the Hungarian-Germans and the creation of a “German minority” in Hungary is very important for a better understanding of the region of Central and Eastern Europe. This is only one of many regions that contains numerous ethnic

minorities and often views these minorities as problems. A better understanding of what an ethnic minority represents will enhance our knowledge of the region and other parts of the world. In my view it is crucial to discern when, how, and why an ethnic minority was created or imagined. My research focuses on one of these minorities, the Germans of twentieth-century Hungary, and it will serve as a model for further research on other groups in the region. I believe that more research, especially micro-research (focusing on local areas) can greatly improve our understanding of ethnic minorities throughout Europe and the world.

Conclusion: My project focuses on the sense of minority-building, by looking at the changing sense of “ethnic identity” among and concerning the Hungarian-Germans. I have focused mainly on the interwar years, because I believe that it was then that a sense of German minority was created in Hungary. I also want to emphasize that a sense of ethnic identity as well as an understanding of ethnic minority is never uniform and is never static. Ethnic identity and ethnic minority are always changing. There are also distinct levels on which these terms are defined, sometime overlapping, sometimes conflicting. And this way I am using the Hungarian-Germans as an example of minority-building, an example that can perhaps be used to better understand the existence of other ethnic minorities, and their conflicts and resolutions in other states.