

Nép, nemzet, zsidó [Folk, Nation, Jew]. By Gábor Gyáni.  
Pozsony: Kalligram, 2013. 280 pp.

In tandem with the changing thematic priorities of international historiography, the interests of Hungarian historian Gábor Gyáni have gradually shifted from social historical topics to explorations in cultural and intellectual history.<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, Gyáni established his reputation with the publication of seminal social and urban historical monographs.<sup>2</sup> He proved instrumental in making social history arguably *the* key field of innovative historical work in early post-communist Hungary,<sup>3</sup> for instance as one of the co-authors of what is probably the most important overview of the modern social history of the country to have been published after 1989.<sup>4</sup>

Since around the turn of the millennium, however, Gyáni's main scholarly preoccupations seem to have changed. As five of his collected volumes released over the course of the past decade and a half demonstrate,<sup>5</sup> Gyáni has devoted sustained attention to the history of historiography, questions of history and memory, nationalism and the so-called “Jewish question,” as well as key issues in contemporary historical theory, above all, those related to the postmodernist challenge. His prolific output on these topics has established him as an important

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1 For more details on the unfolding of this process in Hungary, see Ferenc Laczó and Máté Zombory, “Between Transnational Embeddedness and Relative Isolation. The Moderate Rise of Memory Studies in Hungary,” in *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 106 (2012): 99–125.

2 Gábor Gyáni, *Család, háztartás és a városi cselédség* (Budapest: Magvető, 1983); Idem, *Bérkaszárnya és nyomortelep. A budapesti munkáslakás múltja* (Budapest: Magvető, 1992); Idem, *Hétköznap Budapest. Nagyvárosi élet a századfordulón* (Budapest: Városháza, 1995); Idem, *Az utca és a szalon. A társadalmi tér használata Budapesten 1870–1940* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 1998).

3 On this, see Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor, “Fine-tuning the Polyphonic Past: Hungarian Historical Writing in the 1990s,” in *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in post-Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, and Péter Apor (Budapest: CEU Press, 2007). It ought to be noted that *társadalomtörténet* (social history) has a peculiar and peculiarly inclusive meaning in Hungarian. Around 1989, many Hungarian social historians understood their scholarship as an alternative to political history writing in particular, and their scholarly practices were at times also linked to various forms of social activism.

4 Gábor Gyáni and György Kövér, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a reformkortól a második világháborúig* (Budapest: Osiris, 1998); Gábor Gyáni, György Kövér, and Tibor Valuch, *Social History of Hungary from the Reform Era to the End of the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, Col.: Social Science Monographs, 2004).

5 Gábor Gyáni, *Emlékezés, emlékezet és a történelem elbeszélése* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2000); Idem, *Történelemszűzdiskurzusok* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2002); Idem, *Posztmodern kánon* (Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2003); Idem, *Relatív történelem* (Budapest: Typotex, 2007); Idem, *Az elvesztett múlt. A tapasztalat mint emlékezet és történelem* (Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2010).

mediator of recent international scholarly trends to the scholarly community in Hungary and also as someone who has repeatedly articulated explicit criticisms of professional shortcomings in his native land.<sup>6</sup>

The newest collection of his writings, *Nép, nemzet, zsidó* (Folk, Nation, Jew), offers samples of Gyáni's recent publications. With a single exception, the twelve studies assembled here have already been published in Hungarian-language journals or edited volumes, with two-thirds of them originally released between 2010 and 2012.<sup>7</sup> The introduction promises metahistorical explorations and, more concretely, conceptual and discursive analyses (p.9). One of Gyáni's declared aims, by focusing on the concepts in the volume's title (which also serve as the main subjects of the volume's three sections), is to show how widely pluralistic and historically unstable the semantics of key concepts can be.

*Nép, nemzet, zsidó* begins with "A nép a maga valójában" [The Folk as It Truly Is], a critical examination of a foundational concept in ethnography. Gyáni is interested here, above all, in how the concept of *nép* (folk) has been used in the social historical parts of a recent Hungarian-language ethnography handbook and, more generally, what the recurrent tendency to identify the *nép* with the peasantry has implied for the discipline.<sup>8</sup> Beyond questioning some of the social historical narratives offered by Hungarian ethnographers, the study articulates a critique of the homogenous and essentialized image painted of the peasantry as representative of the folk in particular. Gyáni concludes that this manner of categorization may be crucial to the professional legitimation of the discipline of ethnography, but it is in fact closely intertwined with the history of nationalism and political myth-making (p.27).

In addition to offering such polemical interventions, Gyáni provides differentiated and balanced treatments of various subjects. The nuanced approach characterizing much of the volume is perhaps best illustrated by the studies on Ferenc Erdei and István Bibó. Whereas Gyáni, the social historian, has striven to falsify Erdei's influential image—colloquially known as the theory of the dual

6 See, among others, Gábor Gyáni, "Helyünk a holokauszt történetírásában," in *Kommentár* 3, no 3 (2008): 13–23. See also Idem, "A hazai történetírás nemzetközi beágyazottsága. Egykor és most," *Aetas* 25, no. 4 (2010): 15–27.

7 However, Gyáni occasionally provides explicit links between his studies here, treating them as interlinked chapters (see 27, 41).

8 Attila Paládi-Kovács, ed., *Magyar néprajz VIII. Társadalom* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 2000).

structure—of interwar Hungarian society,<sup>9</sup> here he opposes attempts to discredit Erdei's scholarly contributions by noting the—supposedly non-scholarly—confessional tone of his writings and their explicit political-ideological aims. In response to such critiques, Gyáni argues that Erdei approached and mediated his experiences as a Hungarian peasant by employing various viewpoints, including conceptual ones foreign to the peasantry, and asserts that the partly analytical, partly personal articulation of his experiences may in fact be qualified as the most intriguing and valuable elements of Erdei's writings on the peasantry (pp.56–57). Thus in the chapter entitled “A paraszti individualizáció Erdei Ferenc felfogásában” [Ferenc Erdei's Conception of Peasant Individualization], Gyáni ultimately maintains that, unlike many of his *népi* (populist) contemporaries, Erdei largely succeeded at conveying his intimate knowledge of peasant agency and its social contexts without painting an essentialized image of peasants (pp.58–59).<sup>10</sup>

If the analysis of Erdei offered a generous defense of an author towards whose image of society Gyáni is otherwise critically disposed, his essay on István Bibó's reflections on Jewish identities and assimilation in Hungary, entitled “Az asszimilációkritika Bibó István gondolkodásában” [The Critique of Assimilation in the Thought of István Bibó], does exactly the reverse. Here Gyáni explores the controversial aspects of a contribution to Hungarian historiography that he explicitly recognizes as seminal, even uniquely important. More particularly, the article aims to show that the manner in which Bibó depicted Hungarian Jewry and the history of assimilation in his 1948 essay “The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944” in several respects reproduced his views from the late 1930s, the years of anti-Semitic legal discrimination, which Bibó, like Erdei, was unprepared to condemn. Examining Bibó's personal and intellectual milieu in some detail, Gyáni asserts that his conception was markedly influenced by László Németh's controversial views expressed in *Kisebbségben* (In the Minority) in particular (p.254).<sup>11</sup>

Gyáni concludes that in the late 1940s Bibó still believed that Hungarians and Jews, two supposedly utterly separate “communities of fate” (to attempt to

9 On Erdei's theory as interpreted by Gyáni in English, see Gábor Gyáni, “Image and Reality of a Splitting Country: The Case of Hungary,” in *Mastery and Lost Illusions. Space and Time in the Modernization of Eastern and Central Europe*, ed. Włodzimierz Borodziej, Stanislav Holubec, and Joachim von Puttkamer (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014).

10 On a rather similar assessment of Ferenc Erdei, see István Papp, *A magyar népi mozgalom története, 1920–1990* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2012).

11 For Gyáni's elaborate argument to the same effect, see his “Bibó István kiegyezés-kritikája” [István Bibó's Critique of the Compromise] in the volume, esp. 126–30.

render in English the term *sorsközösség*), displayed similarly strong opposition to their social integration, and this made Jewish assimilation in Hungary an entirely hopeless undertaking. Such an assessment indeed seems to resemble closely that of László Németh, but—as Gyáni is quick to add—Bibó partly reinterpreted Németh in order to avoid putting the chief part of the blame on the Jews. Gyáni reasons that Bibó thereby articulated a narrative of Hungarian social development that largely coincided with that of Ferenc Erdei on the dual structure of society. In Gyáni's assessment, Bibó's "The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944" thus amounted to a rather curious amalgam that courageously explored the causes of the moral bankruptcy of non-Jewish Hungarian society, but which at the very same time aimed to discuss Jewish and non-Jewish shortcomings and failures in a symmetrical fashion, even after the annihilation of the majority of Hungary's Jews.

The chapter entitled "Identitás versus imázs: asszimiláció és diszkrimináció a magyar zsidóság életében" ("Identity versus Image: Assimilation and Discrimination in the Life of Hungarian Jewry") presents Gyáni's broader and more theoretical reflections on closely related questions. This important contribution argues that the two most powerful Hungarian discourses—the assimilationist one and the one focused on the history of anti-Semitism—both fail to offer an adequate representation of the actual historical experiences of assimilated Jews (pp.217–18). Gyáni maintains that both of these discourses are based on an untenable premise according to which images create social realities, and they both fail to study the complex interaction between such dominant images and personal identities over time (p.219). Gyáni argues that processes of social integration deepened over time and produced what he calls a "co-constituted nation." However, the gap between the image of Hungarian Jews and their identity only widened (p.225). By pointing to such a dual process, the study offers an explanation of how "the relative alterity" of the Jews kept on being reproduced in modern Hungary, in spite of the fact that—according to Gyáni—Jews no longer constituted a separate ethnic group.

Similarly to these more theoretical reflections, Gyáni's review of Katalin Fenyves' recent monograph on generational patterns and inter-generational change of intellectuals born Jewish in Hungary leads him to highlight the hybridization of identity.<sup>12</sup> This elaborate review also provides him with an opportunity to critique a historiographical perspective, articulated notably by

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12 Katalin Fenyves, *Képzelt asszimiláció? Négy zsidó értelmiségi nemzedék önképe* (Budapest: Corvina, 2010).

the late Péter Hanák, which affirmed the success of Jewish acculturation by presenting the major roles played by Jewish intellectuals in modern Hungary. According to Gyáni's assessment, the binary of Hungarian *versus* Jewish proves inadequate when attempting to characterize intellectuals who were neither religiously Jewish nor Magyars in the way in which ethnic nationalists understood the notion (p.251).

The section on nation begins with a somewhat sketchy essay on "Nemzetelméletek és a történetírás" (Theories of the Nation and History Writing). Reproduced from a volume originally published by the Hungarian National Gallery, the chapter contains Gyáni's discussion of classics of nationalism studies. It covers several key debates, such as the one on the modernity of nations and the usefulness and limits of distinguishing between political (or civic) and cultural (or ethnic) nationalisms. However, it adds little in the way of original insights. Gyáni's introduction to the field of nationalism studies nonetheless finishes on a rather polemical note with the author elaborating on what he sees as strong parallels between mythical and historical ways of thinking. Pointing to what he perceives as the "fatal" connection between history writing and nationalism in particular, Gyáni ultimately suggests that more profound reflections on collective memories combined with more thorough intertextual and interdisciplinary examinations may help us overcome the dangers of mythicization.

The chapter entitled "A nacionalizmus és az Európa-kép változásai Magyarországon a 19–20. században" (Nationalism and the Changing Image of Europe in Hungary of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries), a key contribution on the theme of the nation, draws an insightful sketch of major developments in the relationship between the two subjects referenced in its title to show that the local contest over Europe tended to acquire considerable additional importance in moments of crisis (p.131). Gyáni explains that in the Hungary of the early decades of nineteenth-century, Europe still served as a model to be emulated, whereas subsequently Europeanness was incorporated into the official state ideology and was increasingly connected to exclusivist forms of Hungarian nationalism. As Gyáni emphasizes, the strength of anti-European ideas was greatly enhanced by the Trianon Peace Treaty and its local interpretations. He also discusses how leading communist-era historians maintained that the country diverged from Western European patterns in order to highlight what was supposedly a deep historical tradition of Eastern Europeanness. As Gyáni notes, confederative and Pan-European proposals may have played a notable role

in public discussions and may even have provided certain groups of intellectuals with a sense of mission, but they remained rather marginal in the overall scheme of things (p.145).

The study on the changing image of Europe in Hungary reveals with special force what I see as a shortcoming of this otherwise excellent volume: the relative marginality of the ambition to situate Hungary in its broader regional and continental contexts.<sup>13</sup> The volume undoubtedly draws on a wide international variety of methodological examples, and the debates on the peculiar features of Hungarian modernization and the special social and cultural roles of Jewish Hungarians in it also have strong parallels in numerous other countries, including—probably most famously—Germany. However, the central ambition of Gábor Gyáni seems to be to reshape local debates by bringing in new international perspectives: his agenda concerns the rethinking—and certainly not the “unthinking”—of the national canon. The extent to which such attempts to convert local idioms of research and debate into the language of contemporary international academia can succeed remains to be seen, as does the extent to which their eminent national stakes will be recognized amidst the contemporary vogue for transnational and global history.

In sum, Gábor Gyáni’s essays in *Nép, nemzet, zsidó* mediate a rich variety of scholarly literature and occasionally draw on in-depth philological investigations to discuss a host of significant themes in social and cultural history, particularly in the study of the nation and nationalism and the related discourses concerning Jewish themes. Although Gyáni’s collection does not offer a systematic analysis of the connection between the latter two subjects and refrains from theorizing the place and role of “Jewish questions” in Hungarian discussions of modern social development and cultural peculiarities, in addition to offering nuanced polemics with previous interpretations, the volume also makes numerous valuable suggestions as to how this immensely complicated and no less controversial subject could be approached in the future.

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13 On the intellectual discourses of Europe in a great number of national contexts, though without the case of Hungary, see Justine Lacroix and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, eds., *European Stories. Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).