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Review of James Koranyi, *Migrating Memories: Romanian Germans in
Modern Europe*

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JAMES KORANYI, *Migrating Memories: Romanian Germans in Modern Europe*, New Studies in European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 340 pp. ISBN 978 1 316 51777 2. £75.00

One can safely state that there is hardly a national or ethnic group that did not suffer from the major crises of the turbulent twentieth century. The author of this book focuses on the history of the Romanian Germans and, more specifically, the emergence of their self-perception as a group in response to the key events shaping European and global history from the First World War. He argues that although there is a significant body of research dealing with shorter periods of Romanian German history and with specific events and their influence on the group identity, '[a] holistic approach, which deals with the wider developments throughout the twentieth century up until the present, has been largely absent' (p. 8). To fill this research gap, James Koranyi has examined an extensive body of sources, including memoirs, pamphlets, newspaper articles, personal letters, travel books, and even trade catalogues. As a result, the book presents a broad picture of national myths and stories passed from generation to generation, which ultimately shaped the distinctive self-image of the Romanian Germans that still persists today, despite all the dramatic changes and developments it went through. The book also pays considerable attention to interactions between Romanian Germans and the nationalities they were in closest contact with (mainly Germans living in Germany and Romanians), keeping account of both conflict and cooperation at different stages of history.

The first chapter looks at the origins of the Romanian German identity, starting with the emergence of Saxon and Swabian communities in Romania. It traces the establishment of three 'pillars' (p. 28) of Romanian Germanness, which were present throughout the whole period studied and are found – sometimes quite unexpectedly – in all the following chapters. These are a sense of Saxon superiority and exceptionalism, a feeling of being under constant threat from a hostile environment, and a Swabian narrative of ordeal and suffering. To illustrate the latter, Koranyi studies in detail Stefan Jäger's triptych of 1910, *Die Einwanderung der Schwaben*. In this painting Jäger, a renowned artist of Swabian origin born in Banat, portrayed the

collective myth of the sufferings of the Romanian Germans through depictions of the hardships the Swabian settlers faced on their way to Banat. The chapter ends by placing these narratives into a broader framework of reception in the interwar period, mainly by looking at exchanges and cross-references in writings originating from Romania, Germany, and Austria.

The second chapter deals with the 'Motherland' narrative of the Romanian Germans and their search for a place of belonging. It looks at various ways in which they attempted to establish, renew, or maintain their ties with the countries which could be called their 'other homeland', from the First Austrian Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany. Koryani argues that although emigration across the Iron Curtain became the path of choice for many Romanian Germans, it did not sever their ties with Romania – on the contrary, the constant flow of correspondence and packages to those left behind, as well as the popularity of holiday trips back to Romania, helped maintain a group identity even after their return to the 'historic Motherland'. Here Koranyi consciously avoids mentioning their ties with Nazi Germany, which are examined in the next chapter, along with the other narratives and themes of the Second World War period. The author claims that the focus of Romanian German collective memory during and after the war was not the group's collective responsibility for the atrocities of war, but the tragedy of 23 August 1944. On this day Romania succumbed to the USSR, which led to decades of suffering under the Communist yoke and deportations of Romanian Germans to Siberia. Once again, the theme of victimhood was reflected in a painting by Stefan Jäger, this time suitably called *Das Tragische Triptychon*. Through visual symbols and allegories, suffering is displayed as the dominant characteristic of Romanian German history during and after the war. Koranyi argues that the victimhood component of group memory gave the Romanian Germans an almost subconscious way of making peace with their controversial past: their participation in the war on the Nazi side and the official but largely unaccepted narrative of the events of the 1940s provided by the Communist regime.

Chapter four investigates the complex and multilayered relationship between the Romanian Germans and the Communist regime in Romania. Koranyi illustrates the transformation of collective attitudes

to the period through the case of Eginald Schlattner, one of the defendants in the infamous authors' trial of 1959. Schlattner (then a student) made a confession under torture which led to the sentencing of the dissidents on trial. In 2001 he published a novel entitled *Rote Handschuhe*, fictionalizing his experiences during the trial. This opened a fierce discussion on the degree to which Romanian Germans collaborated with the dictatorship, once again juxtaposing narratives of victimhood and guilt/responsibility. However, the film adaptation of the novel made only nine years later sparked little or no political debate, demonstrating that the Romanian Germans and Romanian society in general were weary of searching for historical justice, as the contemporary issue of widespread corruption in all political matters had gradually become much more relevant.

The final chapter examines the Romanian Germans' attempts to retain their identity in a new Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Although a mass emigration from Romania took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Romanian Germans did not immediately integrate into a united Germany or any other destination, but reinvented themselves as bridge-builders with a mission to reunite Europe once the threat from the East was gone. The idea that Romanian Germans safeguarded 'Western' values and freedoms throughout their existence as a group, even under the threat of multiple hostile environments, became prominent in the early twenty-first century. It also led to Romanian Germans strongly opposing the inclusion of Romania in European integration until 2007, since they believed that their former motherland simply could not have adopted Western standards (which they themselves allegedly never abandoned) in such a short period of time. The chapter ends with a detailed account of how Romanian Germans have attempted to defend their historical and cultural uniqueness in recent decades, while simultaneously stressing the role that their heritage played in building the Romania—and, ultimately, Europe—of today.

The book under review here gives an excellent overview of the history of the Romanian Germans, requiring little to no prior knowledge of the subject. Thus it could serve as a starting point for anyone wanting to research the topic in more detail. Another clear advantage of the book is its focus on the personal stories of Romanian Germans, which make it possible to trace the evolution of a number of narratives through the

numerous turning points of the twentieth century. By quoting the personal accounts of individuals instead of relying on more generalized narratives provided by media or official reports, the author is able to share a unique insight into the Romanian German community, which still remembers the stories and myths of past generations despite being scattered all over the European continent.

It could be argued that the ambitious goal the author sets himself in the introduction prevents him from studying the issue in depth. Koranyi has clearly attempted to include as many themes and subjects in his book as possible. This results in him dealing rather superficially with some topics, the in-depth analysis of which would clearly require several volumes. However, this multidimensional description of the Romanian German community is also one of the book's advantages, as it might catch readers' attention and encourage further independent research. Readers might also feel that research on Romanian Germans could benefit from studying how outsiders (at the very least, Germans and Romanians) saw this distinct group; this theme is barely touched on here. However, this was clearly not the author's intention and might be the subject of a completely different research project.

To sum up, Koranyi's aim to give a comprehensive account of the whole formation process of myths and themes in the self-perception of Romanian Germans is largely met in this book. The methodology he uses—namely, gathering accounts of key historical events from numerous official and private sources—has proved to be useful in studying the collective memory of different groups. This makes his book a welcome addition to the vast body of research on Central and Eastern European nationalities.

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