FEATURED REVIEW


In 2003, a research program entitled Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in 19th and 20th Century was launched by the European Science Foundation. The scholars in the program sought to explore the intellectual and cultural contexts in which national historical narratives emerged and the extent to which these narratives proved durable as cultural phenomena. Stefan Berger launched the project, and he had the support of Christoph Conrad and Guy P. Marchal in the international research that was done up until 2008. The goal of the program was the publication of a series of eight volumes, and these volumes were indeed published between 2008 and 2015. The book under review is the concluding volume of the series. The books, which altogether come to some 3,700 pages, contain the writings of almost 150 authors from more than 20 countries. Time and space do not allow me to present the results of the Representations of the Past project in its entirety. Berger and Conrad have written a work that provides a synthesis of the entire initiative and thus offers a glimpse into the project as a whole.

The book is divided into seven chapters offering a chronological presentation of the entire history of national historical narratives in Europe. In the introduction, the authors examine the concept of the historical construct of nation, touching on the roles that national histories have played in European Modernity. They do not, however, deal with theories of nationalism. In and of itself, this is not a problem, but it does contribute ultimately to the failure to clarify the precise meaning(s) of the term “national history,” which plays a key role in the train of thought of the entire book. A choice between the constructivist or the ethno-symbolic theories on nation and nationalism and the analytical perspective this would have given would have offered some compensation for this shortcoming. However, with regards to the concept of national history, we are informed only that its function was the creation and maintenance of the nation: “National history has [thus] been one of the main instruments with which to construct collective national identity. […] It is important in our discussions of collective national identity to remain aware of the political functionalisation of this idea.
in historical writing and beyond” (p.8). The writing of history itself is only the subject of the book to the extent that it contributed (or is seen as having contributed) to the historical process of the construction of national identity. It is thus hardly surprising that the authors see the European narratives of history in the Modern era as, without exception, “national.” One justifiably would have preferred a more subtle understanding of the writing of history that took its other uses and functions into account.

This narrowly focused definition defines the trajectory of Berger’s and Conrad’s inquiries, which in principle strive to offer an account of all of the European history writing in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the conclusion of the story is hardly a surprise: “No reader of this volume will be able to escape the sense of the sheer power and longevity of national histories and their influence on national identity formation across Europe” (p.373). The authors know, of course, that national identity was not (and is not) the only form of group identity, but they contend that in Europe of the Modern era no other identity construction was able to displace or play a similar role to that of national identity. According to them, “what was striking everywhere was the extent to which national history subsumed other spatial and non-spatial forms of history writing” (p.365). Yet the fact that, as they concede, “[t]here never existed a ‘one size fits all’ national history in Europe” (p.371) might at least have prompted them to consider possible typologies of national identities (or histories). They dismiss this, however, with the contention that “the construction of such typologies [is] ultimately more burdensome than helpful, especially as they tend to reify the national units of comparison” (p.372). However, Berger and Conrad are endeavoring to show how general and transnational the phenomenon of national history writing was all over Europe.

While on the one hand I am sincerely impressed with the quite possibly unprecedented breadth and depth of the authors’ scholarship and their striking ability to compose a coherent synthesis on the basis of this scholarship, on the other hand I remain a bit skeptical about their operative definition of national history. Before touching on my reservations, however, I will present the essential narrative and its logic.

The notion of historical writing as a presentation of the history of the nation stretches back to the Middle Ages. Berger and Conrad use the term premodern to denote the “national” historical narratives that were prevalent during the time of the rule of dynasties and kings, and they use the term “protomodern” to denote the national narratives of the Enlightenment. In the Age of Enlightenment, the
scope of historical inquiry broadened and became European and even global, but the holistic approach did not sever itself completely from the notion of the national past, and for the most part history and historians put the leading nations of Europe in the foreground of their inquiries and narratives. The Göttingen historians (Schlözer, Gatterrell) did a great deal to promote the spread of the English concept of universal history. At the same time, they also favored the perspectives of national history over the universal history approach.

The writings of Herder and the Romantic approach to history (which was influenced by Herder) lessened the tension between national and transnational history simply by making the concept of history more national. Thus, nothing really stood in the way of the triumph of the national paradigm. Berger and Conrad draw a distinction between the first half of the nineteenth century and the second half, which led up to World War I. At the prompting of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, national historiography, which was imbued with the ideas and ideals of Romanticism, passionately championed the permanence, authenticity, and homogeneity of the national past, and it used the metaphors of growth and development to describe the gradual emergence of characteristics that were allegedly intrinsic to the nation. The people or “Volk” were given a particularly prominent role in this vision, as the “Volk” was seen as the social actor of national history.

German Historicism gave history the prestige and status of a generally accepted discipline. This took place in the roughly half-century between 1850 and 1914. As most of the nations or peoples of Europe embarked down the path towards the capitalist development and political organization based on the concept of the nation state, politics and the academic writing of history entered into an enduring and increasingly close relationship with each other. The canon of methodologically rigorous history writing gained both widespread currency and institutional form all over Europe. Historians began to have some voice on issues concerning contemporary politics, and the canon of a given national history became complexly intertwined with the aspiration for national sovereignty. History acquired a new role and justification as a form of national scholarship, and thus a tradition took root which historians have had to confront ever since.

What should the post-nineteenth century era do with this intellectual heritage? The historiographical nationalism that rose to the fore in the interwar period can justifiably be seen as a kind of logical (if also lamentable) culmination (or devolution) of the national histories of the nineteenth century. World War
I played a considerable role in the direction history as a discipline took, both during the war and in its wake. The borders that were drawn at the end of the war did a great deal to stir nationalist sentiments, both among the victors of the war and the losers. However, the immoderate and extremist regimes that ruled in the interwar period indisputably also bore responsibility. Even Bolshevik historians, who allegedly and even vociferously were internationalists, nonetheless were not exceptions in this regard.

How did the writing of national histories evolve after World War II? According to Berger and Conrad, there were three successive waves of national histories. The first wave came in the first 15 or so years after the war, when in both halves of a newly divided Europe (divided by the Iron Curtain) efforts were made to restore the national historical consciousnesses and identities that had only recently been tearing one another to pieces. Not surprisingly, historians contributed to this process. In the 1960s, however, new winds began to blow. The social science school of history, which emerged in large part because of the influence of the many (primarily French) historians who published in the journal *Annales*, was hardly a convinced adherent of the national history paradigm. However, even this school did not dispense entirely with the concept of national history. This may have been due in part to the fact that, when the communist regimes in Central Europe began to fall and Europe was no longer divided by the Cold War (and indeed a bit before this), the concept of history began to become “re-nationalized” across Europe. True, this was not simply the reemergence of the familiar national historiographies. Rather, more reflective and far less apologetic master narratives told from national perspectives began to gain ground.

As they reach the end of their book, Berger and Conrad must address the following question: is there any chance that at some point in the near future the national historiographical paradigm will be displaced? Berger and Conrad are not terribly optimistic in this regard. Their pessimism stems from the conviction that the original function of the writing of history is the creation, cultivation, and maintenance of national identity. At the same time, however, they do not contest the notion that national identity is itself a historical construct, which could be replaced with another kind of communal identity in time. Furthermore, Berger and Conrad note, national identity is not created exclusively by the writing of national history, though most of the historians of our time continue to cling to a methodological nationalism, and very few would eagerly abandon it. And what other kind of (a territorial based) collective identity could replace national
identity? And yet, as Berger and Conrad observe, “[n]ational identities have, after all, been based on essentialised understandings of ‘self’ and ‘other’. […] Their aggressive and destructive potential is therefore high” (p.378).

This work is a remarkable scholarly achievement. The methodologically consistent examination of the fundamental concept and the empirical substantiation—which is unparalleled in its extensiveness—are deeply impressive. However, with respect to its genre, it does raise some questions concerning the coherence of the notion of a master narrative.

Even if we accept the postulate according to which the scholarly writing of history necessarily takes form as a historical narrative of a national past we still cannot shirk the task of identifying precisely what actually counts as national in a “national” history. According to the answer that Berger and Conrad have given to this question, what only counts is the specific function played by the national histories of a given nation in the creation and continuous strengthening of political (nation state) integration. This is true even when the historiography in question is not emphatically nationalist in its approach, since “the pervasiveness of national history guarantees the propping up of collective national identities and national master narratives” (p.376).

Is this explanation adequate justification for assigning the attributive “national” to all of the histories in Europe of the Modern era? I rather doubt it. If this is the case, then does a history that simply accepts the national borders (the borders of the nation state) as the concrete geographical coordinates of its inquiry and yet deliberately avoids proffering any master narrative of the country’s history still qualify as “national”? This is an important question, because it is more the latter that narrates the past of a people in the form of a national narrative in order to give expression to its alleged historical distinctiveness. I very much doubt that we can regard these two very different historiographical endeavors as similarly “national.”

History is a kind of empirical science, which given its very subject is closely tied to a given “national” site that is essential simply from the perspective of obtaining information (archives, libraries, and the knowledge of a locality). No historian can ever free herself from this “national” constraint entirely. The image of the past that is composed—a past that is necessarily observed, described, and analyzed within national frameworks—thus does not serve the issue of national identity in the same way, though it can never be indifferent to this issue. “Thematic nationalism” (Berger and Conrad do not use this term), which is what we are actually dealing with here, is the methodological path that the historian is
compelled to take in order to give expression in historical narrative to a national and even sometimes a transnational vision. Then, when the epistemologically naïve Realist credo beloved of Historicism begins to lose its authority—and this is happening today—the ground also slips out from under national histories, which were founded on this epistemological conviction. When it begins to become clear that “[t]he capacity of the nation to frame time and space is not inherent; it is a historical variable” (Thomas Bender: Introduction: Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives. In: T. Bender, ed.: Rethinking American History in a Global Age. [2002], 11), the truths of national histories become relative. One finds numerous signs of the influence of this insight in the historiographies of all of the countries of Europe today.

It is regrettable that Berger and Conrad do not take this into account. In an ambitious overview such as theirs, there is always the danger that, given the pressure to incline towards some homogeneity in order to fashion a coherent and persuasive master narrative, differences between emphatically nationalist histories on the one hand and more narrowly national histories on the other will be blurred. Berger and Conrad fail to offer any closer interrogation of the plural nature of the premises and functions of national histories, and this makes their use of terminology reductionist.

Anyone who at least to some extent knows his or her national historiography from the “inside” also knows how very heterogeneous this historiography is, even from the perspective of its “national” contents. Hungarian historiography is also rife with such examples. The Geistesgeschichte that was dominant in the interwar period and its rival, ethno-history, both bore national messages, and yet each threw into question the validity of the other’s conception of “national.” The decisive difference between the two approaches lay in their divergent conceptions of the nation. To cite an additional example, the Marxist endeavors of the 1960s and 1970s to de-nationalize historiography also bore affinities with the similarly Marxist national canon of the national master narrative. In addition, the most prominent representative of both was Erik Molnár, a political and Marxist ideologue who, after 1956, for a time was the decisive figure of power in Hungarian historiography. Molnár launched the debate among historians in which he sought to replace the dominant notion of national history that found manifestation in the struggles for independence with the concept of class and class warfare. At the same time, he organized the composition of the first Marxist master narrative of national history.
The examples I have mentioned suffice to show that without any attempt to address concept history, the distinct function of the concept of the “national” and the concrete meaning of the term in the “national” historiography of a given era cannot be adequately analyzed.

The book includes an appendix (National Historians in Europe) with short biographies of 765 historians. The individuals in this appendix seem to have been included simply because they are mentioned by the authors at some point in the book. The principle on which the selection appears to have been made is incongruous with the title. Thus, the appendix includes people who are neither historians nor Europeans, as well as individuals whose inclusion is entirely unwarranted simply for professional reasons. The appendix also includes many people who are not “national historians” strictly speaking, though of course they are citizens of some country and members of some national community. The appendix is perhaps useful, but it hardly fulfills the role intended for it by the authors, as it sheds no light on the question of how one should understand the notion of national historiography and how to determine who the practitioners of this form of historical inquiry actually are.

The book by Berger and Conrad came into being thanks at least in part to the shared intellectual efforts of many historians. Thus, it offers a faithful mirror of the Writing the Nation research project. As a groundbreaking work of transnational historiography, it is a genuine pleasure to read, and it also provides persuasive proof of the symbiotic relationship between the writing of history and modern politics.

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