

From Brothers to Neighbors and Back. (De)Constructing Multi-Ethnic Nationalisms in Socialist Federations

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Tanja Zimmermann (Hg.): *Brüderlichkeit und Bruderzwist. Mediale Inszenierungen des Aufbaus und des Niedergangs politischer Gemeinschaften in Ost- und Südosteuropa*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014.

Abstract:

The collection of essays investigates the emergence and decline of different concepts of brotherhood in former socialist countries through case-studies devoted primarily to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Chosen topics cover the diverse media through which the brotherhood ideology was constructed, as well as the channels of jeopardization of these supranational projects, including theatre, art exhibitions, popular literature, film, frescoes, historiography, fashion, rock music, photographs from the front, and politicians' interaction. Due to an impressive variety of empirical approaches towards the topic and a thought-provoking theoretical framework, the collection offers indispensable historiographical material for researchers dealing with multi-ethnic societies.

The breakup of socialist federations in the early 1990s sparked the explosion of scholarly and non-scholarly literature on inter-ethnic relations in these countries, most notably in former Yugoslavia. What this trend mostly ignored was a deeper comparative scrutiny of the development of multi-ethnic mechanisms in Eastern Europe and the Balkans during the interwar and socialist eras. This historiographical gap seems to have been gradually rectified in recent years, with Tanja Zimmermann (University of Leipzig) being one of the most prolific researchers of socialist Yugoslav patriotism. She recently edited the volume on this topic, the title and cover of which ironically portray the contested nature of its content. This collection of essays represents the fruit of the three-year long project *Mediale Konstruktionen der „Brüderlichkeit und Einheit“ in der Tschechoslowakei und in Jugoslawien*.

The book investigates different conceptualizations of “brotherhood” in former federations through case-studies – primarily within Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, but occasionally broadening geographical focus to East Germany, Greece, and the Soviet Union. The volume is divided into three parts, reflecting the emergence and decline of multi-ethnic brotherhoods: Concepts and Definitions, Media Constructions, and Media Deconstructions.

In her introduction, the editor points out the double-edged nature of the “brotherhood” concept, as invoked by different actors in different historical contexts. Accordingly, contrasting definitions served to support an array of political agendas, from French revolutionary ideology to Russian imperialism, at their most extreme even fueling fratricide. The cause of the latter’s 1990s manifestation Zimmermann sees in the emotional and teleologically conceived discourse on “brotherhood” that was present in Yugoslavia, in opposition to the more pragmatic “neighbor” approach of Czechoslovaks. Such distinction throws new light on the character of two federations, although one could argue that their different ethnic structures prevent such far-reaching conclusions (the role of other factors in violent dissolution of Yugoslavia notwithstanding).

The volume’s conceptual basis is provided by Stefan Troebst’s categorization of nationality policies in socialist countries, ranging from indigenization (USSR in the 1920s), assimilation (Bulgaria), deportation (USSR, Poland, Bulgaria), separatism (Macedonia, Moldova) to supra-nationalism (Yugoslavia, USSR, Czechoslovakia until 1960s). Christian Voß, on the other hand, offers an interesting comparison of Yugoslav and European Union mechanisms for managing regional differences. Whereas he argues that the two entities share the tacit promotion of particularist nationalisms through regionalist policies, the crucial difference is the more inclusive nature of the European project, and its relative independence from broader geopolitical fluctuations. Yugoslav brotherhood in particular, according to Jan Dutoit and Boris Previši , underwent the critical transformation from interwar tribal Brüderschaft into socialist Brüderlichkeit. The main novelty of that transition was their emphasis on the egalitarian coexistence of different nations, which nevertheless (arguably) maintained certain traits of kinship discourse.

The attempts at forging Yugoslav and Czechoslovak supra-nationalisms are portrayed through diverse media, such as theatre, art exhibitions, political frescoes, historiography, fashion, and rock music, but also include some exotic objects of scrutiny, like photographs of soldiers’ fraternizing at the Eastern Front during the Great War, or the sacral dimension of Soviet leaders’ “brotherly” kiss. The chapters vividly depict the diffuse nature of fraternization networks, which concurrently operated on intra-ethnic, intra-state, and international levels.

The longue duree process of deconstructing socialist brotherhoods is represented through studies that go beyond the temporal confines of the Cold War, such as the interwar Czecho-Slovak antagonism, or racist discourse on ethnically “mixed” marriages in post-Dayton Bosnia. The spatial context of this process is further expanded by research on diachronic fluctuations of Greco-Serbian brotherly rhetoric. Moreover, the analyses of cinematic and literary works by Mirko Kovač and Miljenko Jergović reflect individual artistic coming-to-terms with unfulfilled promises of equality and nostalgia for a (more) multicultural past.

This collection of essays offers an impressive variety of approaches to Yugoslav and Czechoslovak nation-building projects, thus providing an important contribution to growing research on socialist national policies, previously predominantly confined to the Soviet Union. Apart from the theoretically valuable conceptual thematization of brotherhood ideologies, the comparative chapters are especially worth reading, since they successfully embed single-state case-studies into wider synchronic perspectives. Similarly remarkable are those sections with temporal scopes that go beyond the socialist period, for they provide the volume with diachronic depth and thus increase its political actuality. If there is a flaw to be found, it would be that such wider-scoped articles are too few in number. Concurrently, the argumentation of certain chapters, like the one on language policies on Yugoslav TV, seems unconvincing in showcasing wider tendencies in ethnic relations. Similarly, the articles on the socialist architecture of Novi Pazar and on Czech-Vietnamese are rather loosely connected to the overarching concept of ethno-historically grounded brotherhood. Nevertheless, the volume proves indispensable not only for those few researchers of socialist brotherhood(s), but also more broadly for cultural historians dealing with multi-ethnic societies.

German Abstract:

Von Brüdern zu Nachbarn und zurück.

(De)Konstruktion multi-ethnischer Nationalismen in sozialistischen Föderationen

Der Sammelband untersucht die Entstehung und den Niedergang verschiedener Konzeptionen von Brüderlichkeit in ehemaligen sozialistischen Ländern, am Beispiel von vornehmlich mit Jugoslawien und der Tschechoslowakei sich beschäftigenden Fallstudien. Die ausgewählten Themenfelder umfassen sowohl die verschiedenen Medien wodurch die Brüderlichkeitideologien konstruiert als auch abgebaut wurden. Die Themen schließen solche Schwerpunkte ein, wie z.B. Theater, Kunstausstellungen, Literatur, Filme, Freskomalerei, Geschichtswissenschaft, Mode, Rockmusik, Fotografie und Politikerumgang. Aufgrund beeindrucksvoller Vielfalt von empirischen Herangehensweisen und nachdenklich anregendes theoretischen Ansatzes, der Band bietet unentbehrliches geschichtswissenschaftliches Material für die Forscher_innen von multiethnischen Gesellschaften an.

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