«A sanguine bunch». Regional identification in Habsburg Bukovina, 1774-1919
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PREFACE

Bukovina is in every sense a paradox. Everything is upside down here. It almost seems as if this topsy-turvy element had to belong to the nature of this land, as if its character was to consist of this. Everyone feels that Bukovina is something special, not to be put on a level with the other crownlands and that its cultural ties also have a certain nuance of their own, something different from the ordinary. Yet, they only feel. What this character is, however, very few have so far attempted to fathom.\(^1\)

Max Rosenberg, 1914

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the small and easternmost crownland of Bukovina was exceptional in many ways. It was a relatively new addition to the Imperial territory and very much its proper creation: never before had the area with its Habsburg borders been a separate entity before. Subsequently, the large waves of emigrants the authorities encouraged to settle in there would change its character profoundly. As national activism in other Austrian crownlands intensified and gradually intoxicated political and social relations, Bukovina with its many languages and religious denominations was increasingly perceived as a role model of tolerance and diversity. During the final decades of the Empire’s existence, Bukovina was consciously deployed as a pars pro toto for a utopian Austria in which the manifold national identifications were to enhance the State rather than to undermine it. As the Habsburg Empire, struggling to perform the balancing act between Viennese central power and increasing nationalist demands from all over its territory, tried to position itself with all its diversity as ‘a model for Europe’, inside its borders something similar occurred: both in- and outside the crownland, the commonplace of ‘Little Austria’ with its Viennese orientation and its vibrant cultural life gained ground.

The image continued to rumble on long after the Habsburg Empire with its crownlands had vanished, only enhanced by the cultural restrictions the Romanian centralist government had imposed once it had acquired the territory after the First World War - and far more radically after the destruction, devastation, deportations of the Second World War. Finally, the post-war division of the former crownland between the Soviet Union and Romania ended Bukovina’s territorial integrity. Mainly through the works of Bukovinian-born authors such as Paul Celan, Rose Ausländer and Gregor von Rezzori and the nostalgia which dominated the post-Habsburg cultural production, Bukovina transformed from a political reality into a ‘subjunctive space’: a hypothetical timespace of ‘as if’ and ‘what if’.\(^2\) Dreams and expectations were now projected into the past, opposite to the way a Habsburg Austrian in

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\(^1\) Rosenberg, Max, *Heimatkunde - Bukowiner Bauernkunst*, Czernowitz Allgemeine Zeitung, 22.03.1914, p. 7.

1907 had envisaged of how Austrian Bukovina might have looked in the year 2000: Hermann Mittelmann had dreamt of express trains between the Bukovinian cities, of monuments and statues honouring prominent Bukovinians of his era. Just like those of nostalgics of the later twentieth century, Mittelmann’s fantasies were little more than an idealised continuum of tolerance and multi-culturality under the benevolent guidance of the Habsburgs with the tangible proximity of Vienna.³ With the demise of the socialist regimes in Europe and the renewed accessibility of former Eastern bloc countries after 1989, renewed interest for Bukovina also renewed the idea of that historical region as a ‘model for united Europe’.

Such visions were founded on more than mere daydreams. Especially during the last decades of its existence, Habsburg Bukovina boasted a remarkable political and cultural vibrancy. For the backwater in the east which it obviously was, the number of periodicals it produced in the numerous languages of its population was astonishing. In contrast to rural illiteracy, the Bukovinian capital Czernowitz, often depicted as a small version of Vienna, had a wide circle of intellectuals, a dynamic university and a lively local political scene. Nationalist agitation reached Bukovinian society relatively late, which further enhanced its peaceful image. Unlike in neighbouring regions, Jews enjoyed full freedoms in Bukovina. They were therefore prominently present and contributed significantly to the crownland’s cultural production.

Although nationalism dominated the identification discourse both during the Habsburg era and thereafter, it is still mildly ironic that a region which has entered into the public memory as quintessentially multi-cultural has only been described along nationalist lines. ‘The Jews of Bukovina’, ‘The History of the Romanians in Bukovina’ and many similar volumes have seen the light of day, but only a modest number of publications deal with the identity of the crownland in its entirety. When they do, they obediently maintain the segregationist work method of the nationalists and devote separate sections to ‘the different ethnic groups of Austrian Bukovina’. Bukovina is always neatly divided in ethnics categories with all of its respective members sharing an equal fervour for their specific national cause. This way, some aspects of crownland identification might come to the fore, but they never amount to an analysis of just what exactly made the grand total of that powerful point of reference: Bukovina and its ‘Bukovinianness’.

‘Regional identification’ has so far been neglected in the case of Habsburg Bukovina. Nationalists often dismiss it as a conscious attack on ‘the national destiny of the people’ and Habsburg nostalgics usually reduce it to a local branch of Austrianism. Now that the idea of multiple identifications is almost universally accepted and thus different identifications are not expected to exclude one another, regional identification in different degrees - also when there is not a hint of separatism in sight - regularly appears in today’s Europe. While a common European identity is openly contested and national identification still claims the leading part, national politicians often find it hard to assess the intensity of feelings of regional adherence. Two recent examples, one from the Netherlands and one from France, may illustrate this point: Politicians in the Netherlands recently considered merging three of

the country’s provinces into one. Experts did not expect large-scale resistance from these provinces, which are located in the western, urbanised part of the country; contrary to southern and northern Dutch provinces, the three were said to ‘lack provincial identity’, largely caused by the stiff competition of the large, influential cities they host. The province of North Holland is regarded as a random bundle of regions, the small Utrecht province is defined by its capital with the same name and the fairly recently reclaimed Flevoland ‘if at all, derives its identity from the fact that it has none’. Those from Amsterdam consider themselves ‘from Amsterdam first of all, from Amsterdam tenth of all and only from North-Holland eleventh of all’. In comparison, other Dutch provinces are expected ‘to send war ships to the capital’ were they to be merged or dissolved.4

In 2010, the French government met resistance when it decided to bring in new number plates: under the new system, new plates would no longer display département numbers. Those départements, first created after the 1789 revolution, proved to provoke much greater emotional attachment than the Parisian bureaucrats had foreseen. A campaign named ‘Never Without My Département’ was joined by over 220 parliamentary deputies and senators and inspired by the sentiment that ‘it is a matter of roots, of attachment to a land’. In the end, the government revoked its decision and département numbers remained compulsory.5

Coming back to Habsburg Bukovina, the central question remains to which extent a regional identification was experienced and debated during the crownland’s existence. This means that the so far dominant images created by nationalists of ethnically divided, united and nationally-conscious should first of all be critically evaluated. Next, crucial elements and institutions of regional self-identification will be studied in order to analyse the intensity, the shapes and the actors responsible for the resounding concept of ‘Bukovinianness’.

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4 Vriesema, Ingmar, Het onzichtbare leven van de provinciebestuurder, NRC Handelsblad, 2 February 2011, p. 6, and “Ach, die provinciale identiteit bestaat helemaal niet”, NRC Handelsblad, 19 October 2011, pp. 4-5.