«A sanguine bunch». Regional identification in Habsburg Bukovina, 1774-1919
van Drunen, H.F.

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1.2 Conclusion

Historiography on Bukovinian identity during the Habsburg years has traditionally been a compilation of competing national versions. Although each version reserved some space for the Bukovinian specifics which over the years turned into commonplaces such as ‘hospitality’ and ‘multi-ethnic tolerance’, national identification remained the dominant and undisputed factor. The four nationalist movements discussed here were the ones dominating the political spectrum at the time: Romanian, Ruthenian, German and Jewish. Other ethno-national groups such as Poles, Magyars and Armenians and gypsies had no political representation in Bukovina or were so insignificant in number that their national agendas hardly left a mark on identity issues in local politics. Bukovinian Magyars as well as gypsies had no political organisations of their own.

If national movements in Bukovina shared one feature, it was that they were all import products. Only Benno Straucher’s brand of Jewish nationalism might claim local origins up to a point (though most of the ideological input came from Russia and Vienna), but Ruthenian activists relied heavily on influences from Russia and Galicia, their Romanian adversaries looked to the Romanian Kingdom and to Transylvania, while German nationalists got their inspiration from the German lands and Austria proper.

A close analysis reveals that, contrary to what has often been maintained, Bukovinian nationalisms did not develop autonomously and synchronically: partly as the result of external influences and partly as the result of internal Bukovinian dynamics, the main four Bukovinian currents developed in chronological order and as consecutive reactions to their predecessors. Romanian nationalism focused on the ‘Slavic enemy’ and thus paradoxically inspired a Ruthenian response; both Romanian and Ruthenian nationalists then questioned German cultural dominance which opened the door to German ethno-nationalism in response. Strong anti-Semitic currents within German nationalism in turn gave impetus to specifically Jewish solo efforts.

The predominant nationalist conflict was the one between the Romanian and the Ruthenian factions. The key problem was rather their similarities than their differences: both national ideologies were based on the indigeneity principle and as such both groups claimed rights and privileges based on their alleged historical presence. It also meant that fruitful cooperation between the two was as good as impossible, since one’s victory would automatically result in the other’s defeat. In the years preceding German and Jewish nationalism, the bourgeois German-oriented liberals could be regarded as a buffer between the two competitors.

However, once German ethno-nationalism emerged in Bukovina and consecutively encouraged Jewish separatism, Romanian and Ruthenian nationalists realised that only strategic cooperation with either the German or the Jewish faction would secure influential representation in the local political arena. For several reasons, Germans were logical partners for the Romanians. Both nationalist groups struggled with many internal issues, but they had a strong point in common: their respective national identity claims were unquestioned inside
and outside their own circles and received a moral boost with the emergence of Germany and Romania as independent countries (although this also meant German and Romanian nationalists in Bukovina ran more of a risk of being accused of treason by the Austrian authorities in case they identified a bit too blatantly with those newly established nation-states). Both the German nationalist forces in Austria and the Romanian nationalists in the Romanian Kingdom fostered strong anti-Semitic tendencies which in turn were incorporated in the German and Romanian nationalist movements of Bukovina. As a building block for a joint political agenda, anti-Semitism was crucial when the Romanian and German nationalists in Bukovina bonded under the flag of Karl Lueger’s Christian Socials.

In turn, Ruthenians and Jews appeared as allies by default. Still, their respective nationalist development had essential common traits: in general, both ‘nations’ were still deeply divided on the issue of their national identity, on the question if there was one to begin with, if there was an actual common language and if so, which one it was. These identity issues were connected to the relatively recent emergence of Ruthenian and Jewish nationalist thought. Whereas German and Romanian nationalist movements in Bukovina aimed at maintaining the powerful position they claimed to be rightfully theirs (with Romanian nationalists invoking the argument of being the legitimate successor of historical Moldavia and German nationalists claiming to be the logical guardians of the civilizational German language and culture) and as such were conservative by nature, Ruthenian and Jewish national movements could not rely on similar positions and appealed to emancipatory sentiments. It is not surprising that in Bukovina these movements were headed by the talented populists Mykola Vasylyko and Benno Straucher. Their personal friendship further enabled their political partnership.

The emergence of political nationalism in Bukovina increasingly obscured a more fundamental divide in the ‘internal colony’: that of the Orthodox rural population and the post-occupation immigrants. Although Romanian and Ruthenian nationalists seized every opportunity to claim essential cultural and historical distinctions between the two ‘tribes’, day-to-day reality presented a different picture. The Bukovinian peasantry was homogenous in their traditions and in their way of life. Rather than nationality, it was religion which dominated identification. The often automatically linked set of ‘language and culture’ (as in ‘Romanian language and culture’ or ‘Ruthenian language and culture’) was not the matter of course in Bukovina. Where the two dominantly spoken languages obviously differed, the dividing line could not simply be extended to the area of culture. Whether it was poetry, embroidery or food, or, most importantly, religion, a nationality label did not seem to fit. Logically, Romanian and Ruthenian nationalists turned to the only dividing element they possessed: language. With this weapon they attacked the strongest unifying institution in rural Bukovina, the Orthodox Church. A lack of religious dispute notwithstanding, in the final years of Habsburg Bukovina a split of the Bukovinian Orthodox Church into separate Ruthenian and Romanian dioceses seemed the most likely result of these efforts.

Exactly the opposite occurred when nationalism entered the scene of Bukovina’s population with a German cultural orientation. Whereas the unifying element of most of the mainly urban, post-annexation Austrian immigrants and their descendants was German Hochkultur and the German language, German anti-Semitic nationalists had to resort to another divisive
tool in order to rid their target group of Jews. ‘Religion’ was the obvious answer, and by introducing the term ‘Christian Germans’ (as in the Association of Christian Germans) they successfully attained the isolation of non-Jewish German speakers.

In Bukovinian society with the Orthodox Church as well as the affinity with German language and culture as its most defining elements, nationalist activism applied the same mechanism to further split the cornerstones of the Bukovinian population in two. However, the two processes were each other’s mirror image: in the case of the Orthodox religious community, nationalists used language as the instrument to shape Romanian and Ruthenian nationalities. In case of the German-oriented language community, religion was used to distinguish between ‘ethnic Germans’ and Jews.

This closer look at the way nationalist activism proceeded to assure national affiliation also requires a more critical view of the cliché of Habsburg Bukovina’s excellent interethnic relations and the remarkable tolerance between its different cultures. First, as the Romanian-Ruthenian discussion has shown, multilingualism does not automatically imply multiculturalism. Second, in order to claim tolerance between the different nationalities, the alleged members of these nationalities should first of all possess a clear national awareness. In Habsburg Bukovina, signs of such awareness only surfaced on a more general scale in the final decades of the crownland’s existence. Earlier, ‘indifference to nationalism’ seems to have prevailed. Sources referring to interethnic tolerance and harmony on Bukovina thus apply, consciously or subconsciously, nationalist vocabulary. Only under the influence of nationalist historiography the alleged uniqueness of a ‘multi-ethnic’ Bukovinian society could flourish. Nationalists had introduced the notion of a ‘community of different nationalities and their languages/cultures’, and once this had sufficiently penetrated local politics, coalition building was the only way forward. Almost all combinations were tried, but because of the specifics of the different national movements, a Romanian-German versus a Ruthenian-Jewish block proved to be the most sustainable. As such, the nationalist representation of political interests obscured the dichotomy between ‘colonisers’ (who were now split into German and Jewish factions) and ‘colonised’ (now divided into Romanian and Ruthenian nationalists).

The way the different brands of nationalism had found their way into Bukovina has not passed unnoticed at the time. Bukovinian journalists often critically highlighted their advancement and foreignness. The mere fact that such a large number of nationalisms was found on such a small piece of territory also enhanced the ‘party status’ of those different groups, since it was hard not to see all those ‘heroic struggles for historical justice’ in the sobering perspective of day-to-day politicking. The divisive effect of nationalist agitation also was a constant headache for the centralist-liberal press in Czernowitz, which made no secret of what it blamed for increasing levels of discord: imported nationalism. Additionally, for many Bukovinians the possible choice to adopt a national identification was still open. Large segments of urban Jews wanted to be seen as Germans, Bukovinian Orthodox smoothly went in and out Ruthenian and Romanian language realms and nationalist leaders found it increasingly difficult to hide their frustrations regarding this situation.
Another notion already brought forward by several authors in relation to Habsburg Bukovina is the degree to which different religious and linguistic communities actually interacted. It is hardly a revelation that the urban German-oriented bourgeois contingent only had very little business with the rural Orthodox peasantry, but also rural Jews - which tended to be less ‘westernised’ than their urban pendants - seem to have confined themselves largely to the limits of their own religious community. Lippovans (‘Old Believers’) and Magyar speakers inhabited their own small separate settlements and only sporadically appear as more than exotic props in the grand discourse of Austrian Bukovinian multicultural harmony.

The commonplace of Bukovinian tolerance is often linked to the assumption that anti-Semitism found no fertile soil there during the Habsburg years. First voiced in the Czernowitz press of the early 1900s with the hope of discouraging anti-Semitic movements like the Christian-Social Party, the idea of ‘a Jewish El Dorado’ in Austrian Bukovina gathered steam in the works of later memoirists who favourably compared the situation under the Austrians with the misery which was to follow. Indeed, unlike its surrounding territories, Bukovina did not experience pogroms or other forms of serious physical violence, but forms of popular anti-Semitism can be traced throughout the area the Austrians named Bukovina.

With regard to specific regional identification, observers are confronted with two essential Habsburg-Bukovinian characteristics: the fact that the Austrians had created the region and had given it its name and the fact that autonomous Bukovina in fact only existed for a few decades. It has been argued that therefore identification with the region as such was impossible, but a look at relatively recently independent states with borders determined by the former colonisers quickly renders such reasoning invalid. The notion of ‘Bukovinism’ and the claimed existence of a ‘homo Bucovinensis’, no matter how vague or ambiguous this terminology and its instrumentalisation mostly are, already indicates that there was something ‘different’ about the land and its inhabitants.

With its autonomous status and - later - with its university, Bukovina obtained two important institutions vital for its self-image. Naturally, such institutions were not unique in Habsburg Austria and therefore it matters more to study how their functioning was perceived than the mere fact that they existed. The regional diet was a logical product of Bukovina’s autonomous status, but its coalition politics were not: they resulted from Bukovinian demographics, with its local nobility which identified with the Moldavian past and later increasingly with Romanian nationalism and with its growing class of German-Jewish ‘newcomers’ which largely represented urban bourgeoisie. Ruthenian speakers, who lacked an upper class, were represented by nationalist leaders (Young-Ruthenians) who logically represented peasant interests. As such, the basics of Bukovinian political life looked divided along national lines but actually represented social programs. It is therefore not surprising that the terms ‘nationality’ and ‘party’ were regularly used interchangeably. Around the turn of the century, a new generation of politicians emerged with an agenda of social and electoral reforms and joined forces across national lines. Later analysts too readily assume that this cooperation was a unique example of regional interests defying nationalist politics. In fact, the short-lived coalition only came into being because the parties needed each other’s voters to obtain a
majority for their reform agenda. They aimed to defuse possible conflicts by keeping their respective national pursuits out of the collective political discourse. Yet by nationally segregating educational facilities and, later on, by promoting the introduction of segregated electoral registers with the introduction of the ‘Bukovinian Compromise’, the spiritual fathers of the ‘Freethinking Alliance’ are to be regarded as the architects of Bukovinian national division rather than champions of provincial cooperation and tolerance. It is equally questionable if the Austrian goal to create ‘a haven of harmony under the soothing influence of German culture’ was attained with the establishment of a Bukovinian university: the newly-acquired academic staff from outside of Bukovina brought nationalist ideas with them. Local nationalists regarded the swift creation of their own academic elite a matter of prestige and thus flooded the university with their offspring, indifferent of the limited career perspectives the small land had on offer for all those graduates. This way, the university itself had become the producer of a large valve of frustrated nationalists and a stumbling block for the creation of the much-needed class of skilled craftsmen.

Being a Habsburg-Austrian creation with a university named after Emperor Franz Joseph, Bukovinians identified amply with the ruling dynasty. Austria was often considered a rather abstract notion often equalled to ‘arrogant Vienna’ and indifferent politicians, although Bukovinians would equally pride themselves on being Austrian when compared to neighbouring regions or countries they perceived as backward - notably Romania and Russia. The Habsburgs and most of all Franz Joseph, whose reign overlapped almost completely with the existence of the autonomous crownland, evoked intimate feelings of familiarity. The image of the Emperor as a father for his Bukovinian children became stronger once the ruler came of age and befit the parental image even better. Nationalists generally knew better than to attack the figure of the Monarch, but combined their loyalty to the strict condition of ‘unhampered national development’. Nevertheless, the Austrian authorities took no risks and investigated each possible case of treason meticulously. The clear identification of Bukovinians with the ruling house made the contrast with the sentiments of neglect, contempt and marginality all the more hurtful.

In Bukovina, the most obvious benchmarks from which to extract crownland self-identification were the ‘West’ and ‘East’. Whereas ‘the West’ could imply Western Europe and (Western) Austria in general, it was usually Vienna which was seen as cosmopolitan, civilised and clean on the one hand, but arrogant, indifferent and ignorant on the other. ‘The East’ meant Russia certainly, but in the Bukovinian context predominantly referred to neighbours Galicia and Romania: Galicia as the barbaric obstacle on the road to Vienna and Romania - mainly to Bukovinian Romanian nationalists - as the Ottoman-influenced Balkan region with the nerve to criticise Austrian Bukovina. The local press experienced difficulties when determining Bukovina’s exact location: they often situated it as an island of German cultural civilisation, separated by ‘the Galician sea’ from likeminded regions, but just as often confessed to being ‘a piece of Orient’ themselves. In later studies, civilised urban ‘Czernowitz’ generally came to represent Bukovina as a whole and this pars pro toto obscures the ambiguous image Habsburg Bukovinians had of their homeland.
Although there were expressions of pride regarding the land’s position as Austrian watchtower and cultural beacon, its exotic features and its urban, academic capital city, regional identification was mainly epitomised by negative markers like Semi-Asia, stepchild and neglected backwater: when common interests were at stake, nationalist Romanians, Germans and Ruthenians quickly became Bukovinians, ‘native children’ in need of protection from Viennese indifference and Galician aggression. Even over the short period of several decades, those auto-images shifted. A more prominent position of Bukovinian regional identification allowed acknowledgement of a proper regional responsibility for its own well-being and development; vilification of Galicia gave way to appreciation for Galician accomplishments in parliament and for the dynamism of its economic activities; complacency about the homeland’s acclaimed absence of nationalist fanaticism and anti-Semitism turned into the insight of maybe not being so different from other crownlands after all.

Bukovina’s hetero-image was primarily shaped in Vienna, where it was mostly associated - if at all - with exotic rural circumstances and ethics to match. Bukovinian indignation did not change much about the fact that in the Austrian capital, the land was simply perceived as too small, too far away and by some even as too different to even be part of the Empire. This image was to remain, also after Bukovinian authorities actively sought to promote the crownland through the organisation of and active participation in festive and commemorative events. When at home, Bukovinian commemorations and celebrations mostly underlined the crownland’s Austrian character and its adherence to the Throne and mainly served to bring home to the public once more how lucky they were to be Austrians. A Romanian nationalist symbol like Stephen the Great was moulded into a Bukovinian hero. When abroad, Bukovinian organisers, much against what local opinion makers always campaigned for, persistently failed to convey a more adequate image of their homeland. They obediently stuck to what they thought was expected of them: depictions of merrily celebrating national groups in traditional attire without any reference to the land’s urban culture and its modernisations. Moreover, the differences between national folklore nationalists were so eager to underscore were not so obvious to the public.

In conclusion, a number of assumptions about Habsburg Bukovina, some dating back to the Austrian days, others having emerged in post-Austrian studies with divergent origins and agendas, need to be reconsidered. First and foremost, there is the image of ‘the harmonious society of different ethno-national groups’. This terminology is nationalist in itself, since it presupposes the existence of such ethno-national groups. In the case of Bukovina it is particularly clear how complicated, ambiguous and volatile linguistic, religious and social identifications often were and how each and every nationalist ideology gradually penetrating Bukovinian society was an import product. All in all, Bukovina and nationalism were a bad match. This does not mean nationalism was not successful, eventually. It was rather a matter of time. Bukovina’s autonomous status and its actual implementation only came into being in the early 1860 and then had to build a political culture from scratch. Once established, political agendas brought forward under the guise of being nationalist were actually of a social nature. This not only explains why ‘nation’ and ‘party’ were often synonyms in
Bukovina, but also shows that intellectual circles in Bukovina were acutely aware of the not-so-organic rising influence of nationalist currents.

Gradually, national segregation infiltrated Bukovina in the same way it had in other crownlands, with the same negative results: in the final days of its existence, Bukovina faced an Orthodox church split along Romanian-Ruthenian national lines without there being a single religious reason for it; the university produced large numbers of unemployable graduates because education was a nationalist prestige object and this way distorted the local economy; the small number of Bukovinian members of the Imperial Parliament failed to operate effectively because they refused to ignore national divisions. The Freethinking Alliance, in later years often revered for its constructive approach of regional cooperation and seen as a symbol of ‘Bukovinism’ played an instrumental role in this process of national segregation.

Who then promoted identification with Bukovina? Romanian nationalists who continuously claim a Viennese agenda behind the creation of a ‘homo bucovinensis’ fail to back their allegations and archives refuse to reveal anything pointing in this direction. Austrian policy aimed at instilling affinity for Empire and Emperor, at keeping the peace by promoting culture and development and at restoring order when its interests seemed at stake. There never was an a-national political party focusing entirely on common crownland interests. The most obvious reason for this was the dominance of nationalist discourse which insisted that separate national development with a strong focus on language and culture was the natural and the only way: any party proposing an alternative approach was quickly accused of ‘betraying the national cause’ and hence dismissed. It also overstretches creativity to see the Freethinking Alliance as more than a (very) temporary coalition aimed at social and electoral reforms. Though initially mitigated as being ‘of secondary interest’, the coalition partners never abandoned their respective nationalist principles and, as said, were the principle designers of national segregation in Bukovina and the introduction of the electoral registers known as the ‘Bukovinian Compromise’.

The most ardent defenders of ‘Bukovinianness’ were the local German-language press. The Jewish editors of Bukovina’s those periodicals mostly identified with liberalism and Austrian centralism and as such saw most nationalist tendencies as contrary to Austrian and Bukovinian interest. Not only did most newspapers openly admit to one cause only, the Bukovinian one; they also kept a watchful eye on developments detrimental to the crownland’s interests indifferent whether these perceived threats were coming from the Viennese authorities, nationalist propagandists or from apathy in Bukovinian society.