

Katherine Verdery. *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1983. xviii, 436 pp. \$29.95.

This book has many objectives and themes, each of which by itself is worthy of a volume of its present size. Like many social scientists with an area interest in Eastern Europe, Verdery feels compelled to present a broad background for her main foci. As a result, the reader is supplied with an immense dose of the history of an extremely complicated geographical region. Three centuries of Transylvania's past brought down to the level of the anthropological praxis would require the most-objective analysis of local, regional, and national archival data written in the case of Transylvania in Latin, Hungarian, German and Romanian. I am not aware of a single American anthropologist with a working knowledge of all these languages. Of the four, the first two are by far the most important, and to my knowledge Verdery is not familiar with them.

The dozens of "complete" texts and the innumerable lesser tracts on Transylvanian history may be divided into three broad categories: pro-Romanian, pro-Hungarian, and more or less neutral. The first two are usually but not always politically motivated, while the third category comprises the observations of West European writers. Verdery's work follows the third, and we must give her credit in trying to remain neutral on such controversial issues as the original inhabitants of Transylvania, and minority rights today. No doubt her readership will be much less patient with her suspension of judgment than the present observer. While as a historical anthropologist I applaud her cool-headedness on those issues, I feel that my thirst for relevant knowledge on the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations, demographic politics, sociocultural continuity and discontinuity, has not been quenched.

Transylvanian Villagers is really about Romanian speaking peasants only, although we do meet some Saxons and Magyars. Thus, a more appropriate title would be, *Romanian Villagers*. Its focus is a single village, where the author conducted fieldwork for nineteen months between 1973 and 1980. Most of her informants were agricultural servants and their children in this very poor South Transylvanian settlement. The village Bintinti (whose original name we never learn) was a Szekler (Hungarian) settlement for most of its history in spite of the claim by its present-day Romanian inhabitants that "We've Been Here All Along" (p. 181)—the title of chapter 4. It would have been fascinating to learn about the re-peopling of the village after the Szeklers disappeared: how the feudal landlords, the Macskásys "imported" Vlachs and Saxons.

The testimony of her informants does not coincide with my familiarity with the region; and, frankly, I was amazed that her loquacious story-tellers and their outlandish claims were left unverified. According to some of these accounts, peasants were tortured and killed indiscriminately by sadistic Magyar landlords, which all ceased after 1919, when Transylvania was awarded to Romania. The only "good guys" during the serf era were the Habsburgs, who were enlightened and kind to peasants. Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II came to the rescue of the serfs and weakened the lords. While there is some truth to a positive evaluation of these two rulers, their significance for Transylvania should not be overestimated. Maria Theresa's most important decree for the peasants was the *Urbarium*, which regulated the serfs' obligations to their lords, but in many cases it also resulted in the curtailing of peasant liberties. Joseph II ruled only for ten years and he rescinded all his decrees on his deathbed. In any event, Austria's political, social, economic, or religious influence on Transylvania—and especially on Vlach peasants and intellectuals—was minimal. During the eighteenth century the province was a multi-ethnic region run by the Transylvanian diet (with Magyar and Saxon leaders) and overseen by the King of Hungary (not the Emperor), who happened to be Austrian. According to this reviewer, chapter 2, "On the Side of the Emperor: The Development of the Habsburg State to the Mid-Nineteenth Century," is blown out of proportion.

Verdery's historiography rests primarily on Romanian sources: therefore her view is colored by Romanian claims. While she sees the bloody peasant mutiny led by Horia as a true peasant rebellion, the Hungarian war of independence and revolution in 1848 is merely a "civil war" inspired by anti-Joseph II sentiments. The statement that Hungarian royal power declined after 1222 must also be questioned since most of her strongest kings came after that date. On the other hand, Romanians will be pleased to hear that they had a "Revolution of 1918," when in fact only they and the Slovaks in East Central Europe had escaped the horrors of revolutions. I do not disagree with Verdery's observation that Romanian hatred against Hungarians and Saxons was instigated by ambitious politicians and landlords. This topic could have been further explored, for herein lies the real key to interethnic relations in Transylvania. She should have added that virtually nothing has changed in this process to date, with tension penetrating all segments of society, and the Hungarians being the target of ethnocide.

The framework for *Transylvanian Villagers* is provided by Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of world economic systems. Aside from the issue of whether this theory can be profitably applied to Transylvania, its ideas of "core area, peripheral area, developed, underdeveloped, backward, advanced" are extremely difficult to accept for cultural anthropologists who have fought against such ethnocentric notions. This book is more about *logos* than about *anthropos*. From a voluminous text such as this, one would expect more in-depth analysis of anthropological topics, such as family life, social differentiation, political behavior, and beliefs. The text is very cumbersome and the method of slipping from empirical data to theory is tiring. There is little one can question about material on the village Bintinti. There is, however, every reason for my scepticism about the quality of life under socialist Romania. There are very few observers of Transylvania who do not depict conditions there as possibly the worst in Europe. "Sugar by the Kilogram and the Cow's Tail by the Piece" (the title of chapter 1) should be perhaps rewritten as "Empty Stores, Rationed Electricity."

Verdery's work is for advanced graduate students and beyond. No doubt it will be a contested piece of literature for scholars of Eastern Europe.

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