introduction

Stories, Identities, Memories

‘A barren land’: that is how a charter described the land bestowed forever upon the chosen people (vocati), a land where they would be their own masters, a desolate land without people, a land unspoil’d and untouched by the plough, with forests growing unchecked and water flowing unfettered. This was the scene the wanderers encountered.¹

At some point in the twelfth century, a group of people went in search of a new homeland ‘beyond the forest’. On their journey, they encountered aurochs still roaming freely and bears looking for honey. Eventually, they reached the land they were looking for: Transylvania. On arrival, two of the men drew their swords and rammed them into the ground, swearing allegiance to their new homeland. They then separated, each taking their sword to a different place: one to Broos/Orăștie in western Transylvania, and the other to Draas/Drăușeni in eastern Transylvania, where the swords would remain as symbols of their attachment to the wondrous new land. The new settlers worked the land, enduring hardship and wars in the centuries that followed. The union with their land was finally broken in 1944, when the sword in Draas disappeared as the local Germans were evacuated with the retreating Wehrmacht.²

This canonical foundation narrative is told by the Romanian German historian and folklorist Carl Göllner (1911–95) in his Heimatbuch, published in Romania in 1973, Am Rande der Geschichte (On the Edge of History). Göllner’s story recounts one of most prominent episodes in the foundation story which Romanian Germans in the twentieth century told about the origins and ending of their community, a story that combined

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and embellished different phases in the community’s past. Reportedly following the call of King Géza II of Hungary (1130–62), Germans – or Saxons as they were more commonly known – first arrived in Transylvania in the twelfth century, bolstering the frontier zone with fortified churches. Later, throughout the eighteenth century, Swabians settled in the Banat, which at the time was a war-torn and depopulated borderland. Both German groups arrived in the area in the hope of a better life, land, and opportunities. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the two groups had fused into the Romanian German minority in the Romanian state, newly enlarged after 1918. Their combined experiences of the upheavals of the twentieth century spurred them on to another exodus, to a new ‘Promised Land’ in Germany.

This book is about Romanian Germans making sense of modern Europe through their stories and memories. As a group, they experienced major developments and events in Europe in the twentieth century: the reordering of the European map after the First World War, inclusion in the Romanian state, National Socialism, the Second World War, deportation, Cold War division, post-communist uncertainty, and migration. Their exposure to many of the major currents of modern European history forced them continually to reconsider and refashion their identity as a group, processing and reprocessing their collective identity in response to the shifting socio-political pressures that encroached on their community. As this book argues, the greatest challenge Romanian Germans faced throughout the twentieth century was to justify their existence vis-à-vis Germans in Germany and Romanians, as well as other groups and institutions. Defensive ‘people’s stories’ were flexibly remoulded as offensive tactics in their embrace of and commitment to National Socialism. After 1945, Romanian Germans were constantly in search of explanations for their role in National Socialism and communism, as well as their place in Europe more broadly as the Cold War drew to a close.

Romanian Germans came to exist as a group under the pressure of political circumstances: following the end of the First World War, the Romanian state increased its territory and incorporated the former Habsburg regions of Transylvania, Bukovina, and parts of the Banat. In the east, it gained Bessarabia and consolidated its claim on the Dobruja region in the south. Distinct German groups became compatriots almost overnight. The two main groups of greatest interest to us are Transylvanian Saxons (Siebenbürger Sachsen) and Banat Swabians (Banater Schwaben), as well as the Landler from southern Transylvania. Although the German minority in Romania after 1918 also included Bukovina Germans,
Bessarabian Germans, the Germans in Bucharest, and Sathmar Swabians, this book focuses mainly on Banat Swabians and Transylvanian Saxons for a number of reasons. By sheer strength of numbers – 250,000 and 230,000 respectively in the 1930 census in Romania – they dominated Romanian German politics. At the same time, Swabians, and particularly Saxons, were also the most prolific writers in all areas: from personal correspondence to newspaper publishing to literary work. After 1945, they were neither expelled, nor was their territory incorporated into a new state, as was the case for the Bessarabian Germans and most Bukovina Germans. Instead, a sizeable Romanian German community remained in Romania during the Cold War, and Romania would play a key role in debates on identity both before and after 1989. In practice, then, Romanian Germans were mainly defined by Banat Swabians and Transylvanian Saxons, and it is among these two groups that Romanian German history was constructed.

The term ‘Romanian German’ has been a contested one. It has been argued that regional identities prevailed over any sense of Romanian German identity, or that their different confessional identities – Banat Swabian Catholics and Transylvanian Saxon Protestants – undermined adherence to a ‘Romanian German’ group. Much of the resistance to the term has come from Romanian German writers for whom it evokes the minorities policies of the Romanian state in the twentieth century, and Romanian German literature conventionally rejected the term ‘Romanian German’ as ‘artificial’. For Romanian German writers and intellectuals, the label Romanian German has frequently been viewed as a threat to what many feel are the ‘authentic’ regional identities of Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians. This book does not contest the importance of other kinds of constellations of group identities; rather, it operates on the premise that identities exist on different levels and thus coexist even when they appear to be mutually exclusive. Though Swabians and Saxons (and other German groups in Romania) each made attempts to defend their ‘unique’ identity, almost in spite of this a shared sense of community emerged very quickly, and myths of origin and identity were


fused, giving voice to a common experience of Romanian Germans through the twentieth century and beyond.

A sense of a shared Romanian German identity was nascent at the very outset of the enlarged Kingdom of Romania at the end of the First World War. Faced with shared challenges as a minority in interwar Romania, Germans learned to use a common language as a way of making sense of the new political situation. Radicalisation and alignment with Nazi Germany firmly cemented the idea of them being first and foremost Germans in Romania. The language of belonging to a Schicksalgemeinschaft – a so-called community of fate – gave Saxons and Swabians a grammar with which to explain their shared experiences in Romania, which had the effect of beginning to level out regional particularities.

What set Romanian Germans apart from most other German and other east-central European minorities are their experiences at the end of the Second World War and during the Cold War. While it is true that many Germans from Romania were dispersed across Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, a majority of Romanian Germans ended up ‘back’ in Romania by the early communist period. They were the only German group in east-central Europe to suffer repercussions against Germans at the end of the war without facing large-scale expulsions. Even Germans in Hungary, some of whom remained in Hungary after 1945, experienced serious dislocation by various forms of flight and expulsion as the war ended. Others, like Silesian Germans, faced a sudden and violent end to their hybrid identity by comprehensive expulsion as the Second World War drew to a close. The Romanian German community thus gives a unique insight into life under communism as a previously victimised German group. Their experiences after the war and during communism defined them as outsiders, as they were associated with National Socialism despite their official rehabilitation in the 1950s. This meant that Romanian Germans simultaneously had to re-examine their previous links with Nazi Germany and think about how to live in a state that had defined them, temporarily at least, as untrustworthy.

Yet the communist period was not only framed by Romanian German memories of fascism and their subsequent victimisation. Romanian Germans were part of a transnational network in which they were torn between isolation within Romania, association with Romania, and the increasing drive to leave Romania for (West) Germany. Further afield, trans-Atlantic connections would also play an important role. Unlike most other German speakers in east-central Europe, Romanian Germans remained part of their homeland on a scale unparalleled elsewhere, and as a result they developed a complicated relationship with their imagined homeland, Germany. Yet a growing number of Romanian Germans continued to disassociate themselves from Romania by leaving for Germany with increasing urgency during the Cold War. Very little work has been done on the link between earlier experiences in twentieth-century Romania and the subsequent decision to emigrate. While prominent Romanian German authors of prose fiction such as the Nobel Prize laureate Herta Müller (1953—) have found Romanian German experiences a fascinating subject for literature, studies have largely steered clear of explaining the evolution of a minority identity over the course of a century, which resulted in the virtual dissolution of the community by the 1990s. At the end of a fraught century, most of the Romanian German community had migrated to Germany. But far from being the end of Romanian German history, the processes of Europeanisation – political and cultural – exposed Romanian Germans to developments that confronted them yet again with the need to make sense of their transnational existence. The dwindling community in Romania and émigrés in Germany responded differently to the late Cold War and post-communist period; yet, more recent developments within the Romanian German community show a convergence of identity towards a more confident Romanian German self-understanding, embodied most clearly in the figure of Klaus Iohannis (1959—), the Romanian German who was elected president of Romania in 2014.

8 Germans in Hungary are the closest parallel to Romanian Germans, though their numbers dwindled considerably after the Second World War, leaving behind a splintered and rump community that does not compare to the lively German community in Romania. See Swanson, Tangible Belonging, and Sebastian Sparwasser, Identität im Spannungsfeld von Zwangsmigration und Heimkehr: Ungarndeutsche Vertriebene und die Remigration (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2018).
9 Herta Müller, Hetztierte (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2007); Dieter Schlesak, Visa: Ost-West Lektionen (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1970).
Framing Identities and Memories

The growing body of literature on German diasporas, comprehensive in many areas, has opened up avenues for studying identity formation, ‘transnational Germans’, and memory, but it has only begun to take Romanian Germans seriously. Much of the focus has been on Poland, Bohemia, and the Baltic region, as well as the burgeoning interest in Germans overseas in the Americas. In scholarship from east-central Europe, there has been a tendency to focus on ‘their’ minorities: Romanian-language scholarship on Germans and Jews in Romania, Hungarian scholarship on Hungarians abroad, Polish scholarship on Silesian diversity, and so on. Specifically, work on Romanian Germans has often focused on circumscribed periods in Romanian German history,

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and most of this has been done in German. As in much of the work on German diasporas and migrant communities, the Second World War has figured as a dividing line between scholars where German diasporas before the rise of fascism are dealt with in migration history, while German diasporic communities after 1945 have tended to be included in the history of flight and expulsion. As a result, much of the scholarship on east-central European German minorities, including Banat Swabians and Transylvanian Saxons, implicitly distinguishes between Germans as 'doers' before the Second World War and Germans as victims after. Work in east-central European languages on Germans in east-central Europe, and Romania specifically, has been more focused on the topic of expulsion, victimisation, and emigration. German 'doers' as migrants, by contrast, have often coalesced around German history as global history. This book addresses that tension between a parochial post-1945 and a global history of German migration by explaining how these themes are in fact connected.


16 See, for instance, Sebastian Conrad, Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Werner Abelhauser et al., German Industry and Global Enterprise. BASF: The History of a Company (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
In scholarship on Romanian Germans, there have been some important studies on specific topics, often with 1944/5 as the pivot on which they turn. Other work in the field, though fundamental for comprehending the Romanian German community and how they have constructed their history, has had a distinct parochial edge. A holistic approach, which deals with the wider developments throughout the twentieth century up until the present, has been largely absent. While much existing work remains invaluable, it has not been transferred into an international arena. The larger implications of that work for modern European identity debates are often marginalised by an absence of international dialogue. This book positions Romanian German identities and narratives in a broader framework by interrogating scholarship on minorities, identity, nationalism, and myth, while also situating itself in what is now a vibrant body of literature concerned with memory and groups with multiple identity layers, including its transnational dimension.

17 The excellent series of edited volumes published by the publishing house IKGS (Institut für deutsche Kultur und Geschichte Südosteuropas) is a good example of this. See, for instance, Mariana Hausleitner and Harald Roth (eds.), Der Einfluss von Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus auf Minderheiten in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa (Munich: IKGS Verlag, 2006), Mariana Hausleitner (ed.), Deutsche und Juden in Besarabien: 1844–1941 (Munich: IKGS Verlag, 2005), and Krista Zach and Cornelius Zach (eds.), Deutsche und Rumänen in der Erinnerungsliteratur: Memorialistik als Geschichtsquelle (Munich: IKGS Verlag, 2005). The latter book is a unique exception that cuts across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

18 See, for instance, Georg Hromadka, Kleine Chronik des Banater Berglands (Munich: Südostdeutsches Kulturwerk, 1993).

19 A good example of a study on a minority group in the region is the book by Gaby Coldewey et al. on the life stories of Jewish émigrés from Chernivtsi/Czernowitz in the Bukovina; see Gaby Coldewey et al. (eds.), Zwischen Pruth und Jordan: Lebenserinnerungen Czernowitzer Juden (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003). The same applies to studies that try to tell a longer story of the identity of a place; see Thum, Uprooted. A recent edited volume tried to cover the twentieth century more holistically, but there are lacunae in its coverage. See Otmar Trașcă and Remus Gabriel Anghel (eds.), Un veac frâmantat: Germanii din România după 1918 (Cluj-Napoca: Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2018). For an excellent study on Transylvanian Saxon self-image as shaped in the diaspora, see Sacha E. Davis, 'Reflecting on the Diaspora: The Transylvanian Saxon Self-Image and the Saxons Abroad', Siebenbürgische Landeskunde 35/2 (2012), pp. 150–70.

20 Two recent studies incorporate Romanian Germans into broader studies on Transylvania as a European problem and on population transfers of minorities in Europe, even though Romanian Germans are not the subject of these two books; see Holly Case, Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), and Matthew Frank, Making Minorities History: Population Transfer in Twentieth-Century Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

21 This book fits with broader studies on diaspora; see, for instance, Vijay Agnew, Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), Claire Sutherland and Elena Babaniteva (eds.), Diaspora and Citizenship (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), and a study on Romanian migrant diasporas by Ruxandra Trandafilo, Diaspora Online: Identity Politics and Romanian Migrants (New York: Berghahn, 2013).
Framing Identities and Memories

Rogers Brubaker’s work has played a crucial role for understanding minorities in east-central Europe. His concept of ‘groupness’ and his model of the ‘triadic nexus’ have deeply influenced east-central European studies on minorities to such an extent that they have almost become gospel in the field. Brubaker’s model of a ‘triadic nexus’, which allowed him to differentiate between ‘nationalising nationalism’ and ‘transborder nationalisms’ has been applied to Slovak–Hungarian relations, to Hungarian migrants to Hungary, to Ceauşescu’s ‘Nationality Policy’ in 1970s Romania, and to local identities in Transylvania. Applied to Romanian Germans, this model would connect the minority group (in our case Romanian Germans), its actual homeland (Romania after 1918), and its external homeland (varieties of Germany). Yet if, as Brubaker argues, ‘groupness’ is something that is ‘unstable’ and can be mobilised only at particular moments, Romanian Germans present an exceptionally rich and challenging case study. One way to account for that richness has been explored by Cristian Cercel, whose work on the post-war Romanian German community expands Brubaker’s model to a ‘quadratic nexus’ by seeing the émigré community as a fourth component. While the idea of the émigré community acting as a fourth component is appealing, it does not fully do justice to the complex case that Romanian Germans pose. The

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24 Brubaker, Nationalism Reframed, pp. 4, 5; see also Brubaker et al., Nationalist Politics.


26 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, pp. 3, 4.

27 Cristian Cercel, ‘Postwar (West) German–Romanian Relations: Expanding Brubaker’s Analytical Triad’, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 23/3 (2017), pp. 297–317. This is also true of other studies that have played with the idea of a ‘quadratic nexus’; see David J. Smith, ‘Framing the National Question in Central and Eastern Europe: A Quadratic Nexus’, Global Review of Ethnopolitics 2/1 (2002), pp. 3–16.
Romanian German émigré community was too diverse to fit the categories of ‘entrepreneurs’ and ‘enactors’ or even to present a uniform relationship to their ‘home’ in Germany. But Brubaker’s work is indispensable to the understanding of how the Romanian German community functioned. Crucially, it allows us to take terms such as ‘diaspora’, ‘group’, and ‘identity’ not as fixed analytical categories, but as categories of practice.

In the sources this book draws on – essays, newspaper articles, interviews, adverts, letters, poems, visual material – we see, in practice, what it meant to be Romanian German at certain moments in history.

How then might we understand Romanian German identity? This book places the vernacular articulation and understanding of identity by Romanian Germans at the centre of its analysis. Drawing on Brubaker’s model of ‘ethnopolitical entrepreneurs’, who evoke a group when invoking the stories around that group, this book focuses on episodes when Romanian German identities were contested and reshaped by ‘entrepreneurs’. These entrepreneurs are visible in this book: cultural activists, National Socialist enthusiasts, emigration advocates, and homeland associations in Germany, as well as writers and intellectuals. Then there are those Romanian Germans – ‘ordinary’ Romanian Germans – who practised a performative identity, but were not necessarily ‘entrepreneurs’. What united these two categories is their experiences as a group – or ‘groupness’ using Brubaker’s term – at certain moments in time. For Romanian Germans, this meant performing Germanness after the political contours shifted in 1918 or responding to rapid political and ideological realignments from the 1930s through to the end of communism. And, while Romanian German ethnopolitical entrepreneurs have an important role to play in this book, the distinction between them and ‘ordinary people’ is fuzzy.

Studies of ‘banal nationalism’ and heritage culture can help to further clarify the ways in which identities have been mobilised in politically charged and uncertain settings. Concerned with the agency of ‘ordinary people’ in the construction of their own narratives, ‘banal nationalism’ has stood accused of lacking evidential backing. But this book addresses that

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29 See Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, and Brubaker, Grounds for Difference, pp. 128, 129.


31 The idea of ‘banal nationalism’ dates back to Michael Billig’s book from 1995; see Michael Billig, Banal Nationalism (London: Sage, 1995).

32 A special issue of Nations and Nationalism from 2018 tried to tackle the methodological issues around banal nationalism. See Jon Fox and Maarten van Ginderachter, ‘Introduction: Everyday