

A szlovák nemzet születése: Ľudovít Štúr és a szlovák társadalom a 19. századi Magyarországon [The Birth of the Slovak Nation: Ľudovít Štúr and Slovak Society in Hungary in the Nineteenth Century]. By József Demmel. Pozsony: Kalligram, 2011. 373 pp.

After publishing an innovative collection of papers under the title *The Whole of Slovakia Fit on a Raft: Studies on the Slovak History of Nineteenth Century Hungary*,¹ the young historian József Demmel wrote an important monograph about Ľudovít Štúr (1815–1856), the most important figure of modern Slovak nationalism. Demmel, a research fellow at the Research Institute of the National Self-Government of Slovaks in Hungary in Békéscsaba, is held by many to be the emerging star of historical Slovak studies in Hungary. By writing on Štúr, Demmel chooses a hot topic, as the interpretation of the mid-nineteenth-century Slovak linguist-politician radically differs in Hungarian and Slovak historiographies. Hungarian historians generally neglected him; Demmel's book, which is based on his PhD thesis at the University of Budapest, is the first monograph about Štúr in Hungarian ever. If Hungarian authors commented on his activities, they mostly treated him as a Russia-based traitor and troublemaker without any genuine popular support.² At the same time, Štúr became the indisputable core hero of the national fight in the Slovak national canon.³ Since

1 József Demmel, *"Egész Szlovákia elfért egy tutajon..." Tanulmányok a 19. századi Magyarország szlovák történelméről* [The Whole of Slovakia Fit on a Raft: Studies on the Slovak History of Nineteenth-Century Hungary] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2009).

2 See László Csorba, *A tizenkilencedik század története* [The History of the Nineteenth Century] (Budapest: Pannonica, 2000): Štúr is mentioned as the organizer of Slovak cultural life in the 1840s, but his activities during and after the 1848 revolution are not addressed (p.111). In a standard book in Hungarian university education, András Gergely, ed., *Magyarország története a 19. században* [The History of Hungary in the Nineteenth Century] (Budapest: Osiris, 2003), Gergely interprets Štúr's activities as unrealistic, lacking popular support, and in fact contributing to Viennese neo-absolutism (p.248).

3 The heyday of the Štúr-hagiography was the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the publication of Štúr's correspondence, books and pamphlets (the most important: Jozef Ambruš, ed., *Ľudovít Štúr: Dielo v piatich zväzkoch* [The Works of Ľudovít Štúr in Five Volumes] (Bratislava: Slovenské vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry, 1955–57). The Marxist canon was fixed in 1956, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of Štúr with a representative conference: *Ľudovít Štúr: život a dielo 1815–1856: zborník materiálov z konferencie Historického ústavu Slovenskej akadémie vied* [Ľudovít Štúr: Life and Works, 1815–1856: Proceedings of a Conference of the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences] (Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej Akadémie Vied, 1956). An uncritical and hagiographic attitude was present in the Western emigration, too (Jozef Kirschbaum, *Ľudovít Štúr: and His Place in the Slavic World* (Winnipeg: Slovak Institute, 1958). The first critical attempts were published as late as the 2000s (a thematic issue of the journal *OS*, no. 1 (2007).

the 1880s thousands of works of academic and popular literature were devoted to Štúr, which anachronistically canonized his figure and thus prevented any critical approach. It goes without saying that these parallel running narratives were made for “inner use” (for the respective national communities), so they never met. The goal of Demmel was to undermine both interpretations in order to provide an understanding of Štúr that can be valid both in Slovakia and Hungary. Demmel’s ambition is without doubt challenging, as he could hardly rely on the secondary literature of the canon, but rather had to explore a vast number of primary sources and find an appropriate method to avoid falling in the trap of reproducing politically biased ideas.

To solve the problem of parallel national master narratives, Demmel distances himself from the classical, chronological and not thematically based style of biographies of “great men”. Instead, he suggests a thick description à la Geertz of the social contexts and individual choices as a method (pp.23–24). Only thus can the canonized, stable and anachronistic image of Štúr be deconstructed and replaced with a living and dynamic figure, who made his decisions in a complex social environment the members of which cannot simply be divided into good and bad individuals (pp.19–24). However, this method implies a certain fragmentation, as it does not permit the construction of a linear life story. Yet Demmel consciously undertakes this risk, which results in a book resembling more a loose collection of essays than a coherent monograph.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part is dominated by the perspective of the individual. In the first chapter Demmel carefully analyzes the social strategy of the Štúr family, which led through several generations of weavers in the Northwestern Hungarian town of Trenčsén (in Slovakian Trenčín) to Ľudovít’s father Samuel, who became a teacher in the Lutheran elementary school in Zayugróc (in Slovakian Uhrovec). The other main topic of the chapter is the Lutheran environment in which Štúr began his career. The second chapter examines a well-known topos of the Štúr hagiography regarding the origins of his national identity; here Demmel proves the deficiency of the Slovak national canon by combining a critical reading of the sources and some Hungarian secondary literature which has been largely neglected by the canon-making historians. Here the sources enable Demmel to discredit the Slovak national interpretation, but they do not permit him to offer an alternative understanding; the specific reason why Štúr subscribed to the Slovak national idea remains unclear, much as it remains unclear when he made this decision. The third and fourth chapters are devoted to an issue crucial in any individual

life story but fitting into the hagiographic picture of the national hero only with some difficulty: the financial background of Štúr. Coming from a family with a modest income, Štúr had to face financial difficulties throughout his life. He worked as private tutor for several families, however, the wide range of his employers can be explained only by the fact that he was motivated by varying considerations at different times of his life, such as his Slovak national vision and his membership in the Lutheran Church. The latter was the case when he worked for the Prónay family, the head of which, János, was well-known for his support for Lajos Kossuth, Štúr's greatest rival. From a Slovak nationalist angle, this job can hardly be understood, but a thick description of the Lutheran society of Upper Hungary provides a more plausible interpretation. The fifth and sixth chapters examine Štúr's controversial relation to the nobility. The Slovak national canon is dominated by the view that Štúr's main opponents were nationalist Magyar gentrymen, with the exception of one particular, pro-Slovak family, the Osztrólczykys. Replacing this black-and-white picture, Demmel positions Štúr's relation to the nobility into the patron-client pattern, still an important motif in late feudal Hungary. The last chapter of this section investigates Štúr from a gender perspective and deals also with his alleged homosexuality.

While the first part of the book examines Štúr's life story from his individual perspective, the second part is devoted to an analysis of the social environment and political conditions in which he worked. Demmel analyzes first Štúr's unquestionably most relevant deed, the making of the Slovak literary language. Demmel seeks the motivations and possible options for the creation of the standard Slovak language. He points out the important yet incidental role of the Slovak speaking nobility of the Tatra region and then puts it into the Slovak speaking public space of contemporary Hungary. By investigating the subscription data of literary yearbooks and newspapers and the Tatrín association, Demmel is able to provide a detailed composition of the potential supporters of the Slovak national movement, mostly Lutheran provincial intellectuals, teachers, ministers and some members of the petty nobility of the Tatra Mountains. One of the most interesting parts of the book deals with Štúr's activity as a member of the last feudal Diet of Hungary in 1847–1848. Traditionally, the Slovak national canon cast Štúr's role in the parliament as that of an advocate of Slovak national ideology, indeed, as a friend of and spokesman for the people among the oligarchic Magyar gentrymen. First, Demmel examines the city of Zólyom (in Slovakian Zvolen), which delegated Štúr to the Diet, and finds that a mere two dozen local aldermen voted for him, indeed, to represent the interests of

the city only; the sources make no mention of any Slovak national issue. While a member of the Diet, Štúr delivered a speech about a particular Slovak case only once. Instead he mostly dealt with questions of the cities and some general issues. The “urban question” was a key issue in the politics of the 1840s, as the reform-minded liberal gentry aimed to modernize the conservative political system of the cities and introduce democratic reforms in their administration. Therefore Štúr’s activity in the Diet can be understood far better as the work of a politician in the transition from feudal to liberal society than it can as the efforts of a Slovak nationalist. Another chapter of the book is devoted to a topic slightly different from the abovementioned. While the questions Demmel raised before were central to the Slovak national canon but rather marginal in Hungarian historiography, the chapter on the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 touches upon one of the most important points in both national narratives. Demmel points out some incoherent parts of the Slovak national canon, yet avoids passing judgment on Štúr and the civil war he provoked in North Hungary. The final chapters examine Štúr’s last years, in particular the position of Modor (in Slovakian Modra), the town to which he moved in 1851, and the legend of his suicide in 1856. Based on a close reading of the sources, Demmel refutes the view that Štúr lived in isolation in Modor, persecuted by the police, nor does he find any evidence of his suicide.

This relatively long description of the book’s content offers an understanding of the novelty Demmel brings to the discussion. Dissociating himself from the conceptual framework of national master narratives, Demmel provides a much more lively, colorful and plausible picture, not only of Štúr but of mid-nineteenth-century society in Hungary and thus the wider context of Slovak nationalism. Microhistory, the history of mentalities, thick description, and network analysis are Demmel’s keywords, and even though the application of these methods is not novel in the social history in the region, the investigation of a national hero using these approaches is definitely new.

The multiplicity of the applied methodology precludes the construction of a classic linear life story, yet this fragmentation opens the field for similar studies. Some important chapters of Štúr’s life did not fit into Demmel’s book, even though as subjects of study they would have been at least as challenging and probably would have yielded similarly exciting findings. For instance, Štúr’s studies in Germany completely fall out of the scope, and the evolution of his political ideas is touched upon only incidentally. Indeed Demmel was so preoccupied with the deconstruction of the Slovak and Hungarian master

narratives that he did not reflect on the recent “Western” literature on the topic, so one is a bit surprised not to see references to the works on Slovak history by Josette Baer,⁴ Tomasz Kamusella⁵ and Alexander Maxwell.⁶

Nonetheless, Demmel’s book is unquestionably a key reading for anyone interested in the Slovak and Hungarian history of the nineteenth century. The extent to which Demmel has reached his original goal, to provide an understanding of a Slovak national hero that will be considered valid both in Hungary and Slovakia, remains a question, as neither an English nor a Slovak edition has appeared. What is sure is that Hungarian historical scholarship has overwhelmingly praised Demmel’s contribution, so half of the goal has been completed. As the Kalligram publishing house plans to translate the book into Slovak, soon it will be evident the extent to which Slovak historical scholarship is open to a reinterpretation of a central hero constructed by earlier generations that is radical both in its methodology and its narrative content.

Bálint Varga

4 Josette Baer, *Revolution, Modus Vivendi or Sovereignty? The Political Thought of the Slovak National Movement from 1861 to 1914* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2010).

5 Tomasz Kamusella, *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

6 Alexander Maxwell, *Choosing Slovakia: Slavic Hungary, the Czechoslovak Language and Accidental Nationalism* (London: Tauris Academic Series, 2009).