



BOOK REVIEW

Dabrowski, Patrice M. *The Carpathians: Discovering the Highlands of Poland and Ukraine*

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James Koranyi

Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom
Email: james.koranyi@durham.ac.uk

Patrice Dabrowski opens her impressive book on the Carpathians with a simple question: What does it mean to discover a mountain region that was already known? As Dabrowski shows rigorously throughout, the discovery of the Carpathians was marked by “intentionality” and political programmes (5). For “nationally conscious Poles” it meant fostering tourism and showcasing “their” Carpathians to national and international audiences (7). Much of how the Carpathians were presented was dependent on political circumstances and place. Dabrowski treats readers to three sub-regions of the “Polish Carpathians”: the Tatras in the north-west, the Eastern Carpathians (the land of the Hutsuls), and finally the Bieszczady in-between. Each region has a particular temporal focus. The Tatras take us, roughly, up to World War I; the Hutsul region mainly covers the interwar period; and the Bieszczady feature as the site of mass violence in World War II and the contradictory approach toward the nature of the Polish People’s Republic.

The Tatras, perhaps the most iconic mountains for Poland, were “discovered” in 1873 in Father Stolarczyk’s parish chronicle. The number of summer visits to Zakopane—today an absolute tourist hotspot for skiing and drinking—increased that year dramatically to three hundred (19). That same year marked the beginning of the Tatra Society—though officially approved a year later in 1874—placing the organization in a line of alpine associations founded roughly concurrently in the second half of the nineteenth century (27). The Tatra Society looked very similar in its main aims to other associations: to explore, foster tourism, and protect (28). But, as Dabrowski notes, the Tatra Society regarded itself as distinct from other alpine associations because of its “national work” in making the Carpathians Polish. Yet in practice, the Tatra Society’s operations were entirely comparable to other associations: it transformed Zakopane—“the Polish Athens”—into a tourist and health resort by building appropriate infrastructure (38, 39). Dabrowski argues that this process saw the lowlanders becoming “highlandized” and the highlanders becoming “Polonized.” The latter point meant creating “Zakopane style” aesthetics for the Tatras, which also meant acknowledging the “rivalry” over the mountains with Hungarian and German Zips Carpathian enthusiasts (50).

It was minorities that were put under the spotlight of nationalizing forces, Dabrowski argues in her second section of the book. The Hutsuls—contested, admired, and romanticized—feature extensively in Dabrowski’s analysis. Scholarly attention from the 1860s and the extension of the Tatra Society into the Eastern Carpathians in 1877 dragged the Hutsuls into the center of the imaginary of Polish urbanites (69–73). Here, as elsewhere, Dabrowski argues, encroaching modernity changed the rural life of the Hutsul region: between rivalling exhibitions about the Hutsuls, an expanding railway network, and the simmering Polish-Ukrainian tensions over the Eastern Carpathians, the Hutsuls were stuck between essentialist metropolitan images of the group, migration, and borderland contests (75–111). All the while, interwar Polish policies toward the Hutsuls and other minorities such as the Łemko followed a bifurcated approach of celebrating diversity while treating the “otherness” of the minorities as a barrier to Polishness.

In some places, diversity was understood more overtly as a problem. Dabrowski tells the story of World War II and mass violence by focusing on the Western Bieszczady—a region located between

the Zakopane region in the west and the Hutsul region in the east. The presence of eastern Slavs, Jews, Lemkos, and Boikos made the region extra volatile in the period. The book details the devastating impact of the Holocaust on Jewish communities. The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (141) also feature as forces that attempted “cleanse” the region of Polish communities. Lemkos were caught up, as often, in-between and identified as “Ukrainians” and were thus deported to the Soviet Union in a tacit agreement between the Polish Committee of National Liberation and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (142). The third section of the book thus represents a radical but important shift away from metropolitan, bourgeois contests over the meaning of the Carpathians to mass violence and its aftermath in the Polish People’s Republic. In the socialist period, Dabrowski reveals intriguing debates about the meaning of tourism in the Carpathians (150), modernity (145–49), and nature (160–65).

How much the Tatras changed over the course of even just a few decades is palpable throughout the book. It took only three decades to transform the Tatras from the modest excursions in the 1870s to the lively tourist hotspot with cafes, restaurants, and railroads by the turn of the century (54–62). Modernity was also often celebrated as “remote” places adopted names to showcase their modern character. The hamlet of Jaremzcze prided itself as the “Zakopane of the Eastern Carpathians” (85); Kosów, with its sanatorium of Doctor Apolinary Tarnawski, was known as “Galician Meran” (91). Toward the end of the book, the Bieszczady were being viewed through an ecological perspective, although, as Dabrowski contends, any commitment to nature and preservation by the authorities was mere lip service (195).

Dabrowski’s book takes on an unenviable task: How should we write about “peripheries” and mountainous regions? Dabrowski plays with the label periphery by arguing that the Carpathians became something of a center for Polish nation-building. She uses the terms uplanders and lowlanders, indigenous/indigent, and outsiders. Yet her analysis also shows that these labels do not always fit smoothly onto individual groups and actors, and they can be inverted according to changing contexts. The interaction between urban and rural parts throughout the Carpathians blurs those descriptors. The nationalist and ideological pressures on different parts of Carpathians meant changing claims to indigeneity.

More generally, the examples also force us as readers to think more carefully about labels. At what point do individuals such as Tytus Chałubiński—the Varsovian instrumental in founding the Tatra Society who also devoted his life to the Carpathians—or Stanisław Witkiewicz—author of *On the Mountain Pass*, which did much of the heavy lifting to make Zakopane the tourist place we all recognize today—become “insiders”? Would it make sense to still insist on their function as an “outsider”? Is the term “indigeneity” a good enough term to write about people living, traversing, and using a particular place and region? And how does this impact the way we balance different voices and stakeholders for shaping the Carpathians (or any other region and borderland)? As Witkiewicz’s late-nineteenth-century account of the Zakopane region showed, indigeneity is in the eye of the beholder: Jews were never seen as indigenous despite similar claims to “length” of presence in the region. These questions of labels are not only about Carpathian claims in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also concern contemporary political debates about indigeneity, property, and restitution. As we can glean from Dabrowski’s panoramic, readable, and insightful book, the answers to these questions are never straightforward and always contested.