
Review

D. Nešťáková: *Be Fruitful and Multiply*

Nešťáková, Denisa: *Be Fruitful and Multiply. Slovakia's Family Planning Under Three Regimes (1918–1965)*, Marburg: Herder-Institut Verlag 2023. ISBN: 978-3-87969-485-3; 276 S.

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Nešťáková's book is an ambitious attempt to provide a broad perspective on Slovakia's family planning policies and practices during three political regimes: inter-war Czechoslovakia, the Nazi-Germany-aligned Slovak State of the Second World War, and post-war communist Czechoslovakia. The book's central theme – reflected in its title – is pronatalism. Exploring multiple aspects of family planning through various sources, the author argues that, despite changing regimes, pronatalism persisted as a feature of family planning policies and dominated discourses. She also argues that continuity is visible in the use of abortion as the leading practice of birth control across the three regimes until the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1965. This latter event was a turning point and serves as a suitable ending for the book. The book covers a variety of topics related to family planning and family policies: abortion, contraception, the policing of marriage, eugenics, sexualized violence during the war, and prostitution. This broad scope allows the author to explain the context for population concerns and pronatalism.

While the history of family planning in East-Central Europe has sparked considerable scholarly interest and debate in recent years, authors have rarely bridged the interwar and post-war periods in their studies; in this regard, Nešťáková's approach is exceptional. As the book convincingly shows, a more long-term perspective provides an opportunity to better understand continuity and change. The focus on Slovakia as a country with a unique political trajectory and a different religious and ethnic makeup than the Czech lands with which it shared a state for most of the period under study is a valuable approach. Notably, a historical inquiry into family policies allows the author to address current debates in independent Slovakia in the book's introduction and conclusion. Here, the author argues about the importance of historical Slovakian pronatalism for today's attempts to influence the reproductive behaviors of the country's population.

The book offers a glimpse into interesting and sometimes unique primary sources. Nešťáková analyzes court cases, police investigations, and reports on rural areas collected by the local administration, in addition to newspaper articles and expert writings. These sources provide valuable insight into family planning practices and their economic and cultural contexts. Importantly, they reveal people's agency. Throughout the book, Nešťáková stresses that the population, especially women, pursued their reproductive goals despite pronatalist pressures.

Nešťáková's analysis of family planning under three different political regimes is organized chronologically. The first part, which covers the interwar period, explains the specific factors that shaped pronatalism and birth control practices. Rural Slovakia's poverty, mass emigration, and the one-child model influenced by inheritance laws, triggered fears of depopulation and demographic decline among experts, politicians, and Catholic elites. The "one-child system" originated in the Hungarian and Slovak peasantry because of the inheritance law. All children, including female family members, were entitled to receive part of the property, leading to land fragmentation. Limiting the number of children thus aimed to protect a family's economic well-being. Catholicism, on the other hand, softened the eugenic discourse. Numerous efforts to liberalize the abortion law inherited from the Hungarian criminal code, allowing for abortion only "if it could be proven that the woman's life or health was endangered," (p. 12) failed due to strong opposition, including from Jozef Tiso, a priest and Minister of Health.

The second part of the book brings us to fascist Slovakia, where, as the title summarizes, a Slovak version of the German "Kinder-Küche-Kirche" developed, combining elements of Nazi racist ideology and Catholic sexual morality. Abortion law was tightened in 1941: Abortion was not allowed even in the case of a threat to a woman's life. The same law banned contraceptives except for condoms, which were seen as preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections rather than a contraceptive method. At the same time, the state invested in pro-family benefits. Despite repressive pronatalist policies, birth rates did not significantly increase. Transgressing strict Catholic fascist morality was tolerated among the male elites, while "fallen women," i.e., unmarried pregnant women, would be publicly shamed and not allowed to attend a ritual called "vadzka" ("churching") – a blessing of the woman postpartum (this ritual persisted until the 1960s).

The post-war period is a shared story for Slovakia and the Czech lands. Nešťáková describes the advancements the communist regime brought for women, such as equalizing the status of children born in and out of wedlock and, later, the legalization of abortion. However, her dominant argument is about the continuity of pronatalism and the state's quest to control and shape people's (and especially women's) reproductive behavior. Only the declared aim changed, as nationalist rhetoric was abandoned in favor of socialist rhetoric: the need to provide a labor force. The role of Catholicism could be addressed to a greater extent in this chapter, as it was crucial in the Slovak context and heavily discussed in the chapters dedicated to the interwar and war periods.

While the author discusses other means of birth control practiced by the Slovaks throughout the period under study, such as coitus interruptus and condoms, she points to abortion as the most common solution. Initially illegal, from 1957 it was regulated and subjected to the judgment of abortion committees. Abortion nevertheless remained a primary site of exercising agency. Crucially, Nešťáková analyzes the class dimension of abortion accessibility and practice. She draws the reader's attention to activists who demanded the right to legal abortion, such as leftist women in the interwar period, to achieve gender and economic equality. In Nešťáková's study, women are the protagonists of the struggle to ease access to abortion, build a network of abortion providers, and gain control over their repro-

ductive choices. At the same time, women bore most of the negative consequences of transgressing sexual morals, including shaming, criminal prosecution, and health risks.

A focus on Slovakia provides a unique perspective on three very different regimes: the interwar democratic Czechoslovak state (established after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, with Slovakia inheriting Hungarian laws and Czech lands subject to Austrian laws), the Catholic fascist Tiso regime, and a seemingly unifying Czechoslovak communist state. Nešťáková argues that they shared one feature: pronatalism. Each regime “proclaimed a very different reason for multiplying – nation – state – proletariat – but the result was the same – more children” (p. 212). What is sometimes missing is a deeper engagement with the literature on family planning in the broader region (for example, Hungary, Poland, and East Germany in the post-war period). Nevertheless, the book can and will undoubtedly serve as a starting point for further comparisons across time and space.

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