

**Daniela Stanciu-Păscărița, *Loisir în vremuri de pace și război. Germanii din Sibiu și Timișoara* [Loisir in times of peace and war. The Germans in Sibiu and Timișoara], Cluj-Napoca, Mega, 2024, 340 p.<sup>1</sup>**

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*La Belle Époque* continues to exert a unique fascination, both in historiography, literature or visual arts, regardless of the geographical setting where the research or narrative takes place. It is as if, even a century later, we are still living with the psychological aftermath of the Great War, still orienting ourselves chronologically through a "before" (a patriarchal world where modernity emerged slowly) and an "after" (a time of triumphant, accelerated modernity on all fronts, though one whose fast-forward momentum conceals the sinister grin of interwar extremisms and looming war).

Recent historiography of the Habsburg Monarchy—including notable Romanian contributions—has made a credible case (and the evidence continues to grow) that in order to understand the collapse of the modern empires, it is not enough to analyse only the breaks and ruptures; one must also recover and examine the continuities. However, in Romanian historiography—particularly in works focused on the Great War—less attention has been paid to the continuities of the prewar era: how individuals and institutions adapted to a state of conflict and managed to preserve everyday structures in their least altered forms.

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian version of this book presentation was published in *Studii și Articole de istorie*, 92 (2025): 288-290.



This is precisely what Dana Stanciu's book does, taking on a compelling subject: leisure—the daily use of free time—in two southeastern cities of the Habsburg Monarchy with predominantly German communities: Sibiu / Hermannstadt / Nagyszeben and Timișoara / Temeschwar / Temesvár, in the decades before the First World War, during the war years, and in some cases, even into the early interwar period. The volume builds on the author's doctoral dissertation and retains much of its structure, providing readers with a substantial introductory chapter, where sources and relevant historiography are discussed, the conceptual and methodological framework is laid out, and the anthropological perspective underpinning the work is brought into focus.

Throughout the entire book, the author consistently shows how the historian—particularly one focused on urban life—can and should be an anthropologist as well. The reconstruction of daily life she offers (drawn from hundreds of fragments of documents, newspaper notices, ego-documents, and letters) revolves around people—“everyday people,” “ordinary individuals” in all their social diversity, the kinds of persons you might have met and interacted with if time travel, in defiance of scientific laws, were possible.

Moreover, the book does not speak merely about those who enjoyed leisure, but also about those who made it possible. Behind the cafés, terraces, and gardens that hosted a variety of events are local entrepreneurs—those who constructed the framework for leisure activities, naturally with business motives. The reader is thus granted access to both perspectives: the one from behind the counter and the one in front of it—from the person pouring the beer to the one drinking it.

Still within the anthropological scope are discussions related to etiquette in public spaces and norms of social interaction, attention to fashion and the transfer of aesthetic styles in clothing and cosmetics, as well as urban rituals such as coffee drinking, promenading, or attending balls—the latter receiving a dedicated chapter.

As we move slowly toward the tragedy of the years 1914–1919, the author and her book explore issues of economy, demography, public health, modernization, and prosperity—in essence, the social, material, and mental preconditions for the development of a leisure culture in spaces inherently shaped by urban sociability. Naturally, leisure continues even during less favourable times (epidemics, economic crises, wars), but the specific *joie de*

*vivre* implied by the concept requires a certain level of well-being—a level that, as the book shows, was not entirely extinguished by the war's hardships and deprivations.

The reconstruction offered by the author is a dynamic one: motor-driven and consumer-oriented, and the backdrop of these daily activities is painstakingly recovered as well. The book contains hundreds of place names, most of them now lost—be they establishments, streets, or neighbourhoods in both cities. In doing so, the recovered topography and toponymy of urban space bring back the cities of Sibiu and Timișoara of over a century ago as they might have appeared to a contemporary visitor's eyes. This is one of those rare works of history that could easily be projected onto an interactive map. Indeed, the appendices at the end—with street name equivalents and addresses of venues—alongside period illustrations, greatly contribute to this effect.

As for the term “consumerism”—a bit of terminological license on the part of the reviewer, since the author herself consistently refers only to “consumption”—a large portion of the book can also be read through that lens: a history of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century consumerism on the geographical edge of the Habsburg Monarchy. It is not only a matter of goods consumption but also of public services and trends (such as fashion)—in other words, the birth of the service-based economy as we know it today.

Finally, but no less importantly, we must emphasise the fact that the history reconstructed by Dana Stanciu is also a history of civil society—of the ways in which urban gregariousness gives rise to institutional entities or at least social initiatives intended to help those less fortunate, transforming sociability into a useful community tool (“charitable leisure”).

Dana Stanciu's work manages to provide a deep, nuanced, and multifaceted perspective on everyday life in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sibiu and Timișoara, connecting social and cultural history with economic and anthropological dimensions in a way that enriches our understanding of the Habsburg Monarchy and of urban development in regions that, after 1918, became part of Romania. Due to its thorough documentation, scholarly rigor, and interdisciplinary approach, the book demonstrates that the history of leisure is an integral and necessary part of understanding societies of the past—especially those undergoing rapid modernization.