

# Lucie Varga and Her Alpine Studies

Peter Schöttler – Historian

## Abstract

Lucie Varga, née Rosa Stern (1904–1941), was an Austrian historian from a Jewish family who emigrated to Paris in 1933. For some years she became the first woman to collaborate on a regular basis with Lucien Febvre and the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. During her summer holidays of 1935 and 1936 and after consulting Malinowski she undertook fieldwork in two alpine valleys in Vorarlberg and in South Tyrol. In the resulting essays, which today appear as a kind of “historical anthropology” *avant la lettre*, she describes the gradual transformation of the valleys and the transition from the old mountain economy to the modern tourist business. However, she not only deals with economic change, but also with the difficult overcoming of the traditional world of beliefs, in which German Nazis or Italian Fascists appear as competitors not only to the catholic priests, but to witches and demons.

Lucie Varga, née Rosa Stern (1904–1941), was an Austrian and subsequently French historian from a non-practicing Jewish family.<sup>1</sup> After a doctorate in History at the University of Vienna, she moved to Paris in December 1933 – together with her second husband, the Marxist philosopher Franz Borkenau (1900–1957) – in order to escape rising anti-Semitism and the political crisis. In Paris she came into contact with Lucien Febvre and the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* for which she became the first woman to collaborate on a regular basis. That was unusual, but even more unusual were the articles that she contributed to that journal and the *Revue de synthèse*, or the *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, through which she made an independent

---

1 For Varga's biography and a list of her publications, see Schöttler (1991, pp. 13–114, pp. 247–250). For the latest findings on Varga's feminism, on her work in the German and Austrian resistance etc. see Schöttler (2015, pp. 150–179).

Part of

Tauber, E. & Zinn, D.L. (Eds.). (2023). *Malinowski and the Alps – Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. bu.press.

<https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461940>



contribution to the emerging *histoire des mentalités*. For a long time, however, this contribution was forgotten. Firstly, because Varga died in April 1941 aged thirty-six (from lack of insulin), so that most of her research projects remained unfinished and all her papers were lost in the chaos of war and occupation. Secondly, because she was a woman and involved in a love affair (with Lucien Febvre), which was not well received at the time: After the war, and especially after Febvre's death in 1956, all of Varga's letters were destroyed by his widow and a kind of *damnatio memoriae* imposed on her. It was only decades later that this unjust state of affairs was remedied and her work rediscovered.

Although Varga's academic focus was primarily on medieval heretics (the Cathars) and early-modern religious beliefs, three contemporary-history essays are without doubt her most important contribution to scholarship. The first, a lengthy study on National Socialism as a sociological and anthropological phenomenon, was written in 1936 and published in the *Annales* in 1937 (see Schöttler, 1991, pp. 119–140). While most analysts at the time emphasised either the political and economic or intellectual roots of the Hitler movement, Varga insisted that it was something “entirely new”, which could not be explained by a single phenomenon. Rather, it involved transposed memories and of a conversion and illumination in the religious sense, leading people to enter what she called “experiential groups” (*Erlebnisgruppen*). By joining the brown shirt “movement” life took on meaning again, and even one that is revolutionary. The national-socialist revolution “means simplifying everything and imposing dualisms everywhere: Friend or foe, comrade-in-arms or adversary, strength or weakness, you or I, hunter or hunted” And, above all, it required a blind, fanatical faith in the Führer and his wisdom, total self-sacrifice.

Only a small minority escaped this totalitarian grip. In 1937, Varga could say very little that was concrete about the motivation for, and forms of, resistance. But, based on her experience of travelling in Germany and the anti-church propaganda of the regime, she suspected that resistance was particularly strong in Catholic circles because there was mental support there which could compete with the Nazis' worldview. By turning to Christianity, she thought, “the totalitarian political religion of national socialism could be countered by a divine totalitarian religion”.

By opposing “divine totalitarian religion” and “totalitarian political religion”, she refers to Erich Voegelin’s distinction between “inner-worldly” and “super worldly” religion.<sup>2</sup> However, what appears with Voegelin to be a purely philosophical reflection and is not meant in a critical way, is for Varga founded in sociology (see Schöttler, 1997). At the same time, her project is altogether more modest: In place of Voegelin’s universal theory of consciousness, in which Nazism is just an example of a gnostic mass movement and an *Ersatz* religion, she carries out empirical investigations, such as her field work on the transformation of two Alpine valleys, the Montafontal in Vorarlberg and the Ennebergtal in South Tyrol, where the Nazis, or the Italian fascists, appear as competitors to priests, witches, and even demons.

Lucie Varga’s “Dans une vallée du Vorarlberg”, published in January 1936 in the *Annales*<sup>3</sup>, is an important (albeit little known) contribution, firstly, to the social, cultural, and political transformation of an alpine area in the early 20th century, and, secondly, to the emergence of Nazism in the Austrian Alps before the “Anschluss”. Based on local investigations and interviews – “my mother found always people to talk to”, said Berta Varga (letter to the author, January 7, 1990) – carried out in the Montafontal during the summer of 1935, the article shows the connections between modernisation (especially through small-scale industries and tourism after World War I) and the gradual transformation of local customs, rituals and beliefs which allowed Nazism, as an ideology and allegiance, to penetrate the region.

After a short but passionate plea for an alliance between history and ethnology – rather uncommon in a historical journal at that time – the article starts with a description of the valley in the Austrian region of Vorarlberg. The Great War turns out to be a watershed. Tourism transforms the villages and the villagers. A new “elite” of hotel owners and innkeepers and their families gradually prevails over the mountain farmers. The influence of the priest declines, while “progress” becomes the new slogan. Even in the upper valley, urban lifestyles from the towns of Bludenz or Bregenz (capital of Vorarlberg) are the examples to follow. But this does not mean that ancient

2 Voegelin, E. (1938). *Die politischen Religionen*. Bermann-Fischer. Translated as *Political Religions* (Lewiston NY, 1986). As if by chance, I found a copy of the first edition of this book in the remains of Varga’s library in Viroflay near Paris (see Schöttler, 1994).

3 First (relatively free) English translation by George Huppert (Varga, 1936/2006). New English translation in the present book.

practices and conventions have disappeared, and there is still a big difference between locals and “foreigners”.

Nazism proves to be a fundamental turning point. With the closing of the border, German tourists stay away and the whole valley is thrown into crisis. There are economic as well as cultural consequences. At the same time as the Austrofascist government in Vienna tries to discredit the Germans and restore confidence in the state and the church, the ideology of “progress” has fostered national socialism as a movement of the young and the “uprooted” (*déclassés*) whose social, economic and cultural “settings” (*cadres*) have been destroyed. In Vorarlberg, Nazism seems to be less antisemitic than anticlerical, and as a new political religion, it offers great expectations of progress and salvation.

In a way, Varga’s second article “Sorcellerie d’hier. Enquête dans une vallée ladine” (1939) on the Ennebergtal and Val Badia in the Dolomites<sup>4</sup>, forms a continuation of the first and yet takes a different approach. While the Montafon study examines social change from the more general perspective of social history and folklore, the second essay turns to her preoccupation with late-medieval witchcraft as a variant of heresy. The focus is on a remote village society with its own language (Ladin), rituals and religious opinions. Above all, Varga is interested in witchcraft beliefs, rudiments of which still exist: She notes down the spells and describes the imaginary and the social effectiveness of witchcraft as an antithesis to the Catholic church and its priests. Although these are terse, rather laconic notes, the author tries to immerse herself in the world of the women who have broken from the village order and to understand the practical rationality of their rebellion: “Belief in the witch has its place in the functioning of village society. What a relief to believe in the materiality of evil powers! In having the ability to accuse someone when you are unsuccessful, in being able to conjure up evil powers, the causes of these misfortunes, hope is reborn.”

When the article was written, historical research on witches was still in its infancy. Interest focused almost exclusively on the history of the persecutions, while the belief of the witches was dismissed as an “obscure delusion” (Hansen, 1900). Only since the 1960s – beginning with Carlo Ginzburg’s

---

4 English translation in the present book.

study of the Benandanti and promoted by the emergence of women's history – has a separate field of research been established that also encompasses the magical thinking of the present day: And questions and explanations stemming from cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis play an important role in this. Again, it is possible to say that Varga was a forerunner. Her essay does not merely report the superstitions of mountain people but outlines the cultural logic of witchcraft as a “profession”, then gradually being supplanted by new points of reference such as tourism, the city and the state. And the author mischievously informs her audience that unfortunately her stay was too short to study all the witches' rituals and the remnants of their magic in more detail, so she was unable to learn the technique of bewitchment: “But I have no doubt that it is possible.”

Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the genesis of both texts. Obviously, both are based on trips Varga took in 1935 and 1936 during the summer holidays with her ten-year-old daughter Berta and Febvre's slightly older son Henri. At times, her husband Franz Borkenau and her long-time friend Hilde Adelberg, a psychologist, joined them. Borkenau had already moved from Paris to London. There he was in contact with Malinowski whose LSE seminar he participated in and from whom he hoped for support in his search for a professorship somewhere in the world. As stated in the first footnote of the Montafon article, Varga had met with Malinowski at some point and acknowledged his “useful suggestions” in the preparation of her work. We also know from a letter from Henri Febvre to his parents that a meeting took place in Zurich in September 1935: “Mr. and Mrs. Borkenau have left for Zurich where they are to see a certain Malinowski, an ethnologist, of whom Mr. Borkenau speaks very highly.”<sup>5</sup> But it is even possible that Varga had spoken to Malinowski earlier while visiting Borkenau in London. Since her Austrian passport has been preserved (in private collection), we know that she travelled quite frequently from Paris to England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland and Italy. However, the border control stamps do not always provide sufficient information. For the summer of 1935, for example, there is

---

5 „Monsieur et Madame Borkenau sont partis pour Zurich où ils doivent voir un certain Malinowski, ethnologue, dont Monsieur Borkenau dit beaucoup de bien.“ Henri Febvre to Lucien and Susanne Febvre, Gargellen, September 5, 1935. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Fonds Lucien Febvre. Varga's summer stays are also a topic from time to time in the correspondence between Febvre and Marc Bloch (see Müller, 2003, pp. 296 ff.)

little evidence for her movements, while for 1936 they show Varga travelled several times from Gries am Brenner to South Tyrol with the two children. The following year she crossed the Italian border again, via Sillian im Pustertal, for three weeks. These could have been the stays that formed the basis of her study of Val Badia.

At first sight, both articles have the appearance of light travelogues, but they turn out to be much more. In reality they are careful studies of the emergence of modernity in two Alpine valleys whose methodological approach the author has discussed with Malinowski, himself a fine connoisseur – he owned a summer house in Oberbozen – of the Alps. At the same time, these articles are an early attempt to analyse the rise of German Nazism in Vorarlberg and the growing impact of Italian Fascism in South Tyrol, highlighting their emotional attraction to underprivileged people of different origins. And while she criticises the old metaphor of *Basis und Überbau*, Varga suggests that Nazism especially – although the same is true for Fascism – has to be thought of as a kind of “political religion” and to be analysed via categories of conversion, worship and “magic”. In retrospect one can say that even before Malinowski and others formulated arguments in that direction (see Stone, 2003), she made an important early contribution to the historical anthropology of totalitarian movements.

## References

- Hansen, J. (1990). *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozeß im Mittelalter und die Entstehung der großen Hexenverfolgung* [Magical delusion, inquisition and witch trial in the Middle Ages and the emergence of the great witch hunt]. Oldenbourg.
- Müller, B. (Ed.). (2003). *Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre et les Annales d'histoire économique et sociale. Correspondence, Vol. II, 1934–1937*. Fayard.
- Schöttler, P. (1991). *Lucie Varga, Les autorités invisibles. Une historienne autrichienne aux "Annales" dans les années trente*. [Invisible authorities. An Austrian historian at the «Annales» in the 1930s]. Le Cerf. German edition: *Zeitenwende. Mentalitätshistorische Studien 1936–1939*, Suhrkamp, 1991.
- Schöttler, P. (1994). Lucie Vargas Bücher. Erfahrungen mit einer un abgeschlossenen Biographie [Lucie Varga's books. Experiences with an uncompleted biography]. *Werkstatt Geschichte*, 7, 63–66.
- Schöttler, P. (1997). Das Konzept der politischen Religionen bei Lucie Varga und Franz Borkenau [The concept of political religions in Lucie Varga and Franz Borkenau]. In M. Ley & J. H. Schoeps (Eds.), *Der Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion* [National socialism as political religion] (pp. 186–205). Philo Verlag.
- Schöttler, P. (2015). *Die "Annales"-Historiker und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft* [The "Annales" historians and German historiography]. Mohr-Siebeck.
- Stone, D. (2003). Nazism as modern magic: Bronislaw Malinowski's political anthropology. *History and Anthropology*, 14, 203–218.
- Varga, L. (1936). Dans une vallée du Vorarlberg: D'avant-hier a aujourd'hui. *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, 8(37), 1–20. (English translation published in this volume)
- Varga, L. (1937). La genèse du national-socialisme. Notes d'analyse sociale [The genesis of national-socialism. Notes from a social analysis]. *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, 9(48), 529–546.
- Varga, L. (1937). La recherche historique et l'opposition catholique en Allemagne 1936 [Historical research and the Catholic opposition in Germany, 1936]. *Revue de Synthèse*, 13, 49–56.

Varga, L. (1939). Sorcellerie d'hier: Enquête dans une vallée ladine. *Annales d'Histoire Sociale*, 1(2), 121–132. (English translation published in this volume)

Varga, L., (2006). In an Alpine valley. (G. Huppert, Trans.). *The Journal of the Historical Society*, 6, 251–274. Original work published 1936. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5923.2006.00178.x>