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Hungary for Western Eyes

László Kontler: *Millennium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary*. Atlantis Publishing House, 1999, 537 pages, illustrated with black and white plates.

Csaba Csorba, János Estók and Konrád Salamon: *The Illustrated History of Hungary*. Magyar Könyvklub, 1999, 247 pp. Colour illustrations throughout.

"Professional historians," writes R. J. Evans, "publish works that no sane person would attempt to read from beginning to end; works that are designed explicitly for reference rather than reading. They usually lack the kind of literary ability that would make their work rival that of minor poets or novelists. If they had it, no doubt most of them would be writing poetry or fiction."¹ Here we have two new histories of Hungary against which this coat-trailing remark may be measured, both of them ostensibly aimed at the "educated reader of average knowledge," as Kontler puts it. There, however, the resemblance between the two books ends, since *Millennium in Central Europe* is a densely written survey that eschews the colourful anecdote or provocative detail, while *The Illustrated History of Hungary* is teeming with vivid incidentals, its verbal illustration of a theme often being as lively as the many fine illustrations that accompany the

text. In a sense, the books are complementary, the one offering a narrative dramatic enough to make the pulses run, the other scrupulously concerned with balance and restraint.

According to László Kontler, who teaches history at Eötvös University and the Central European University in Budapest, his target audience has hitherto contemplated "the history of Hungary in terms of convenient stereotypes. Even if the crudest associations of Hungarianness (*csikós, gulyás, puszta*, Gypsy music etc.) are discounted, schematic simplifications—partly inspired from Hungary itself—dominate the Western European and North American conception of Hungary's place in the world. In Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary's one-time status as a great regional power, her subsequent reduction in size as well as international importance, and the resulting impulses have evoked equally simplistic and emotionally coloured assessments of her role in the region's history. The model of "a nation making ceaseless (and perhaps laudable) efforts at emerging from (half-)barbarity to the fold of Europe," or "a small nation struggling and surviving against the odds", or "a nation of oppressors turned trouble-

makers" and their likes offer stereotypes which the book intends to dispel or—since some of them, as most distortions, contain a grain of reality—develop with an eye to substantiation. These remarks in the Preface are quite a good indication of Kontler's general approach, an argument cast in the form of propositions both supported and disputed: stereotypes are bad because they misrepresent; on the other hand, the historian can indeed substantiate some of them, at least partially, so they can't be all bad. The layman may therefore be forgiven for believing, in the light of this, that the historian's nuanced historical judgement may sometimes turn out to be a respectably grounded and more carefully formulated version of the despised stereotype.

By contrast to the almost agonized caution of Kontler, we know exactly where we are heading as soon as we look at the inside flap of *The Illustrated History*, which features a long quotation from Gyula Illyés's 1938 contribution to a book entitled *Hungarians* (I retain the sometimes odd English of the translation): "Hungarians... owe their existence to their audacious struggles. These struggles were defensive fight from the beginning and became increasingly desperate as time went by. All hopeless. Surprisingly enough, these are the most hopeless at the moment they are launched: the enemy is always at least twenty times stronger, and sober minds would avoid such a venture. The nation, famous for its calm and objective way of thinking, is aware that its venture can only end in failure, but still, time and again it attacks Goliath. Our forebodings always prove right, but we never learn from the lesson. Our history does not teach us logic. It teaches us, and this is comforting and lofty, that such things like courage, audacity and insistence on ideas also have value in the life of nations.

People can live thousands of years only through miracles, using the example of the phoenix."

These words (a better translation would communicate more of their nobility and less of their pathos) evoke not so much the historian as frustrated poet conjured by Evans, but rather more the poet as frustrated historian. Much of Europe's popular narrative history, like its romantic literature, has traditionally served and continues to serve as an assertion of national identity. There is nothing in the least wrong with that, if the history is thoroughly grounded in research and doesn't gloss over or suppress the awkward facts. *The Illustrated History* is not demeaned by being classed as such a work, and indeed this was probably inherent in the authors' commission, given that it was evidently prepared with the featured Hungarian presence at the 1999 Frankfurt Book Fair in mind. It boasts an introduction by the Minister of National Cultural Heritage (in Britain, this is roughly the equivalent of having an anodyne Preface written by minor royalty), which concludes: "On the anniversary of Hungary's 1000-year statehood, we can rightly be proud of ... our ancestors' preservation of independent statehood and of the specific Hungarian culture that we contributed to the joint cultural treasures of Europe". Here the book joins hands with Kontler's text, for the always implicit and not infrequently stated premise of both works is that Hungary, at least from the time of Prince Géza's more or less opportunistic conversion to Christianity, has always been an integral part of Western Europe politically and culturally. The perception of marginalization is comparatively recent and extremely misleading. True, Hungarians themselves may have contributed to that perception (large chunks of Hungarian history are devoted to implicit or explicit discussion of this),

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1 ■ Richard J. Evans: *In Defence of History*, London 1997, p. 70.

but that does not alter the underlying reality: at an early stage in its history as a settled nation, an irrevocable geopolitical decision steered Hungary out of the orbit of potentially influential Byzantium and anchored her among the competing, but in crucial respects similar, kingdoms and empires of Catholic Christendom.

In view of this it is appropriate that Kontler begins his book with some *Reflections on Symbolic Geography*, which begin with the claim that "Hungary lies indeed at the geometrical centre of Europe", which is a slightly curious idea, but one that explains why the cultural geographer Jenő Cholnoky thought that if Central Europe truly exists, it could only be the territory of the historic Kingdom of Hungary. Kontler continues with a masterly analysis of the "subjective or emotional as well as objective or structural factors" that influence symbolic geography. As recent work in this field by authors such as Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova² has demonstrated, territories may acquire a particular profile in terms of symbolic geography that is as much imposed by external factors and political anxieties as generated from within the territory concerned. Thus Wolff has pointed out that the old cultural assumption of "refined" south (Rome, Florence, Venice) and "barbaric" north shifted in the course of the Enlightenment to a new conceptual division between "Western" Europe and "Eastern" Europe, whereby the "Orient" was a term no more discriminating than areas on medieval maps supposedly inhabited by dragons. "Prague," writes Kontler, "just north-west of Vienna, Warsaw, Cracow, Pressburg/Bratislava/Pozsony and Buda were often considered

to be as oriental as St Petersburg, Moscow or Odessa; Bohemia, Poland and Hungary to be as non-western as Siberia." The term "Balkan" (which only means mountain) became even more indiscriminate, and the closer you were to the borders of its imagined territory, the more culturally (and negatively) charged was your use of the term.

Some less controversial and ultimately more revealing distinctions between the regions of 18th century Europe are usefully outlined by Kontler as follows: in the West and the North an "historical accident" had created large and relatively strong nation-states (England, Spain, France and [?] Sweden); In the middle zone, adjacent to the west, were the multi-state nations (Italians and Germans); Next to (or beyond) them lay an area of multinational states, "where foreign dynasties and composite elites ruled over a great number of more or less populous ethnic groups among conditions of socio-economic backwardness which increased as one proceeded east and south-east: the Habsburg, the Russian and the Ottoman Empires". In our own age, this tripartite division has altered under the influence of Jenő Szűcs's famous article on the three historical regions of Europe³, which postulates distinctive Eastern and Western Europes, the core lands of Central Europe (Poland, the Czech Lands and Hungary) lying in between them. These Central European lands were always strongly identified with the West culturally, but found themselves held back in certain well-known respects of their economic, social and political development.

Kontler's very balanced discussion of symbolic geography in the Hungarian con-

text offers little support, however, for what he calls the "self-fulfilling prophecy" of those who mistake a potential or an aspiration for the reality. While "there is certainly a great deal of truth in the claim that there is an ultimate identification in terms of fundamental historical structures between the Occident proper and this central zone of the European continent ... it is also quite true that in many aspects this is mere wishful thinking, and the sharp distinction between this region and the ones east and south-east of it is over-emphasized: an outcome of prejudice, suspicion and contempt." In an age where once again nationalism has raised its head and scholars like Samuel P. Huntington are talking about the "clash of civilizations",⁴ such topics all too easily occupy the battleground where the politically correct fight it out with the cultural chauvinists (both protagonists perhaps sharing more prejudices than they care to admit). Kontler is surely right to add the following: "The notion of Central Europe and the view of the nations and lands usually associated with it as Central European remains useful if we regard it, instead of a statement of fact, a heuristic device, as part of the modern self-reflection of the peoples concerned."

I have dwelt at some length on the matter of symbolic geography because it is so intimately linked to Hungarian self-perception and therefore must affect the way their history is written. In fact both books under review show a striking similarity in their choice of periodization, each with seven sections. The first chooses itself (from the origins of the Magyars to the Conquest), as does the second (the medieval monarchy from its inception to its demise at the catastrophic battle of

Mohács in 1526), although Kontler splits this into two, the caesura being marked by the extinction of the Árpád dynasty at the end of the 13th century. The third section in the *Illustrated History* runs from Mohács to the end of the reform era, while Kontler splits this more manageably into a Chapter IV, called *Wedged between Empires (1526–1711)*, and a Chapter V called *Enlightenment, Reform and Revolution (1711–1849)*. Both then have a section (*Toward a Bourgeois Hungary and The Advent of Modernity*) that brings us up to World War I, followed by one that brings the story up to the end of World War II. The final two sections of the *Illustrated History* (*Under Soviet Rule* and *Back to Europe*) are dealt with by Kontler in Chapter 7 entitled *Utopias and their Failures (1945–1989)*, to which he attaches a meditative epilogue surveying the events in Hungary since 1989.

This similarity in periodization, while it obviously indicates a near consensus regarding the turning points of Hungarian history, conceals considerable differences in the approach to the narrative. However, the authors of both books preface each major section with an overview of the period to be narrated which contextualizes the material and helps to keep the reader in mind of contemporary European developments. In the case of Kontler, these chapter prefaces offer valuable short essays that enable him to develop his intellectual sub-text or *leitmotif*, without obtruding upon the narrative. A good example is the following passage that precedes his Chapter III: "The impression that by the late Middle Ages Hungary had made up for her disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the West might even be strengthened by the contemplation of the fact that whereas the

2 ■ Larry Wolff: *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map and the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, 1994; Maria Todorova: *Imagining the Balkans*, New York and Oxford, 1997.

3 ■ Jenő Szűcs: "The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An Outline", in John Keane (ed.) *Civil Society and the State* (London, 1988), 291–332. Full text in *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* (1983).

4 ■ Samuel P. Huntington: *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, 1997).

fourteenth century is supposed to have been a period of profound 'crisis' in Western Europe, it was, by and large, one of economic prosperity and political stability in Hungary, again in tandem with Bohemia and Poland. Upon closer scrutiny, this image proves false: to put it simply, Hungary remained unaffected by the crisis precisely because it was also unaffected by important aspects of the development that occasioned it in the West. The crisis was one of hyperbolic growth, and is now considered as a series of birth pangs of the modernity that Europe's dynamism between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries rested upon." By the introduction to Chapter IV (*Wedge between Empires*) Kontler is quoting Márton Csombor on the gap developing between Hungary and the West and remarking that the agrarian boom of 16th century Hungary "failed to generate a structural transformation leading to the capitalization of agriculture or the rise of industries linked with it". Nor can Habsburg mercantilism be blamed for this, since it was a phenomena that well predated the onset of absolutism in the late 17th century.

In the preface to Chapter V we learn how structural weakness was compounded by a century and a half of Ottoman occupation and partition, producing a country of contradictions with "proverbially fertile soil but vast areas of fallow and marshlands (less than 2.4 per cent of its territory was cultivated in 1720)..." To these problems were added the debilitating effects of the Rákóczi War of Independence (1703-1711), the price of whose political gains was the almost total subordination of the national interest to that of the nobility. In the 19th century the picture brightens with the rapid development of a middle class, economic expansion and the advent of a constitutional monarchy in 1867. There was, of course, a downside,

namely "the mutual incompatibility of competing national movements", which may have been insoluble, even had the Hungarians been sooner alert to them during their brief spell of independence in the revolution of 1848-9. Finally comes the dissolution of historic Hungary, competing explanations for the cause of which are offered in the preface to Chapter VII: some continue to believe that it was the result of "rival nationalisms in the region with the complicity of western great powers", most others see it as the "inevitable product of centrifugal forces" (but surely these two formulations amount to nearly the same thing?). By the time we come to the preface to Chapter VIII, the external factors responsible for Hungary's plight are firmly (and, I would have thought, uncontroversially) in the foreground. As Kontler puts it: "1956 repeated the pattern of 1849, 1918-1920 and 1944-1948 in that international contingencies once again, and perhaps even more shockingly than ever before, deprived Hungary of the opportunity of lifting the limitations on its sovereignty and going the way it wanted."

It will be seen from these (admittedly selective) quotations that the spectres of the stereotypes against which the author has warned us at the beginning of his book have not entirely been banished. It is after all hard to write a Hungarian history that entirely avoids being either a study of supposed national failure or an apologia for the Magyars, often both at the same time. This makes the stubborn even-handedness of Kontler's writing even more impressive. It is interesting to compare his approach to one of the most disputed issues in Hungarian historiography over the years, namely the mercantilist system imposed on the country in 1754, with that of the *Illustrated History*. The latter simply states that this "stunted the growth of

Hungarian agriculture and industry" and made Hungary "the raw material and food supplier of the more developed industry of the Austrian and Bohemian provinces". Kontler supplies us with the background to these measures, which were part of a package aimed "at invigorating all sectors of the [imperial] economy, substituting for lost Silesia, and distributing the financial obligations of the subjects more equitably than before." He allows that the regulations, which imposed high tariffs on all Hungarian goods exported to non-Habsburg lands and on Hungarian manufactured products sold in western Habsburg provinces were "clearly discriminative", and might superficially seem to justify the label of "colonial economic policy", often applied to it. However, he argues that the policy "did not suffocate ... the growth of Hungarian manufactures, [because] there was very little to suffocate. ... The economic inequality between Hungary and the western Habsburg lands did not emerge as a result of the new regulations, and did not increase as a result of them." It was true that there were "damaging losses" in the former flourishing export trade of cattle to Venice, wine to Poland and Britain and grain exports elsewhere, but this did not alter the established fact that "Hungary had been an economic dependency of western regions." No doubt it was inconvenient for Hungarian purchasers to be forced to buy "somewhat inferior and more expensive articles" from the neighbouring Habsburg lands" instead of the "better and cheaper products from Silesia and Germany" of heretofore: "but for the Hungarian craftsmen and the few industrialists, the competition of these products [from the western part of the Empire] was less dangerous and consequently more conducive to progress, which despite the confinements, did take place in the number of capitalist factories and the sophisti-

cation of their products as well (though out of altogether merely 125 such enterprises, there were only seven that had more than a hundred employees in 1790). Furthermore, Maria Theresa's motives were not those of specifically disadvantaging Hungary, but of closing the gap between the Empire and her more economically advanced rivals by "developing the established branches of the economy in both halves of her empire". The tariffs were also one of several money-raising measures intended to compensate for the tax exemption of the Hungarian nobility although they did not in fact succeed in increasing state revenues from Hungary.

This argument is, to say the least, ingenious (to assert that the aggressive measures designed to keep Hungary out of manufacturing were anyway needed to protect the sector, because it was so weak is a circular argument with a vengeance) but I have quoted it at some length to illustrate the author's lofty refusal to sully his text with slogans such as "colonialism" and his persistence in impartial explanation of the motives of those who influenced the course of Hungary's history for good or for ill. The same balance is evident in the treatment of the 1848 War of Independence (he even eschews the common phrase "lawful revolution" on a strict interpretation of the Diet's procedural requirements) and of the Horthy era. Both books indeed give an impressively detailed and clear account of the April Laws of 1848, including the implications of those laws for the status of ethnic minorities. It is to be expected, perhaps, that the *Illustrated History* presents a more robust Hungarian view of the Revolution, repeatedly stressing the lawfulness of the Hungarian government approved by the simple-minded Emperor Ferdinand: "the court ... abandoned all legality: it made Prime Minister Batthyány resign and illegally dis-

solved the Hungarian Parliament... the empire's government prepared for the annihilation of the legally established Hungarian bourgeois state", and so on. A similar robustness is apparent in its treatment of the fatal Trianon agreement ("the peace conference decided even on the most important territorial issues exclusively on the basis of statements from the representatives of the greedy successor states"). However, it is no less clear-eyed than Kontler on the simultaneous inevitability and impossibility of Horthy's policy of irredentism: "The victorious Western democracies would have accepted the rightfulness of the struggle for ethnically more just borders reluctantly. Hungarian revisionist policy, however, demanded full restoration of historical Hungary, that is, the re-annexation of the areas of non-Hungarian nationality as well, on the basis of historical right. No serious support could be won for this cause. And since not only Hungary but also the rest of the countries in the region harboured irredentist claims, they later became easy prey to the extremist political adventurism of Hitler's empire."

Enough has been quoted, I hope, to illustrate the difference in tone and narrative style of these two books, both excellent in their own way. *The Illustrated History* with its lively text aimed at the general reader who may or may not have much knowledge of Hungary. A major bonus is that it has quite the best selection of pictures I have ever seen in a book of this sort, often as many as seven or eight to a double spread, both black and white and colour. Some of these are familiar enough (it is obviously difficult to be very original in illustrating the earlier periods), but for this reader at least, many were fascinating discoveries. Particularly interesting are the illustrations relating to society

and culture: I would single out some striking images, like that of a young Hungarian peasant woman singing into a phonograph at the time of the 1900 Paris World Fair (p. 170); or János Csonka's motor car (p. 160), which was successfully test-driven in 1905; or a splendid portrait of Josef Bem on horseback (p. 136). These and many other wonderful illustrations really do add an extra dimension to the book bringing individuals and events sometimes terrifyingly alive. Look, for instance, at Page 137, where the bottom right-hand corner has a moving and heroic depiction of the judicial murder of Prime Minister Count Lajos Batthyány, perhaps the most tragic victim of Austrian reprisals in 1849. Immediately above it is a chilling portrait of the psychopathic Austrian general, Baron Haynau, and above that a naïve representation of the capitulation of the Hungarian army at Világos. On either side of these pictures, the text relates the grim statistics: 13 military leaders executed ... 120 people sent to the gallows ... 1500 imprisoned ... over 40,000 Hungarian soldiers and officers forcibly drafted into the imperial army as common soldiers. It is a brilliant, almost cinematic, piece of bookmaking.

The keen student of Hungarian history could benefit from possession of both of these books. Those who are content with a good read accompanied by vivid and well chosen pictures will plump for the *Illustrated History*. Those who feel the need of a sophisticated and learned discussion of issues in Hungarian history embedded in a detailed and often dense narrative, will obviously plump for *Millennium in Central Europe*. At any rate, what with the recent publication of Ignác Romsics's *History of Hungary in the Twentieth Century* and Paul Lendvai's *Die Ungarn*, it would appear that Hungarian history-writing is enjoying a boom. Long may it continue. ■

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"Our Troops Are Fighting"

New Evidence from the Archives

Jenő Györkei and Miklós Horváth, eds.: *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956*. Transl. Emma Roper-Evans. Budapest, Central European University Press, 1999. xv + 318 pp. Tables, photographs, maps, endnotes, biographical notes.

The *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956*, edited by Jenő Györkei of the Military History Institute in Budapest, and Miklós Horváth, of the Hungarian Army's Political College, is a worthy addition to the series of books by Columbia University Press (Atlantic Studies on Society in Change) that surveys many aspects of East Central European society.¹ Originally published in Hungarian in 1996, this book consists of three essays, each about one hundred pages, by Györkei and Horváth, Alexander Kirov, and Yevgeny Malashenko, respectively.² All three selections primarily focus on Soviet and Hungarian military actions in the 1956 crisis, rather than the Soviet decision-making process, or the influence of other Warsaw Pact countries.

In the preface, Béla Király, the editor-in-chief of the series and himself a key participant in the 1956 events, poses—and then answers—four questions about the

Hungarian crisis, which have preoccupied scholars from former Communist countries. First, was the 1956 uprising a revolution or counter-revolution? If it was a revolution, did it succeed or fail? As Király contends, "Without 1956 the 'lawful revolution' that commenced in 1989 and is still in progress would not have happened, or if it had, it would not have been what it is today." (xiv) (The Hungarian Parliament passed a resolution on May 2, 1990 classifying the events of 1956 as a "revolution and 'war of independence.'") Second, was the introduction of Soviet troops an aggressive act, or did it constitute military aid to a beleaguered Socialist state that had requested it? Király confirms that the Soviet actions did amount to war by pointing out the size of the Soviet military force used in Hungary in the November 4 intervention (17 divisional units, the number of Soviet casualties (722 men killed, 1,25 wounded), and the number of decorations awarded to Soviet soldiers (26 "Hero of the Soviet Union" decorations, 10,000 combat decorations).

Király argues that if the Soviet Union had to exert such a great effort, this could not have constituted mere "aid" to Hungary. (Let us also remember Hungarian Premier Imre Nagy's last radio appeal at 5:20 a.m. on November 4, in which he said that the Soviet Union "attacked our capital

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