



# TIMES ONLINE

SUBSCRIBER ARCHIVE

THE TLS

Home

TLS Highlights

Subscribe

Subscriber Archive

Letters to the Editor

TLS Table

Noticeboard

About Us

FAQs

Contact Us

How to Advertise

## TLS THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

The TLS

July 25, 2003

### Heroes and traitors

Istvan Deak

A HISTORY OF HUNGARY. Laszlo Kontler. 527pp. Palgrave. Paperback, Pounds 15.99

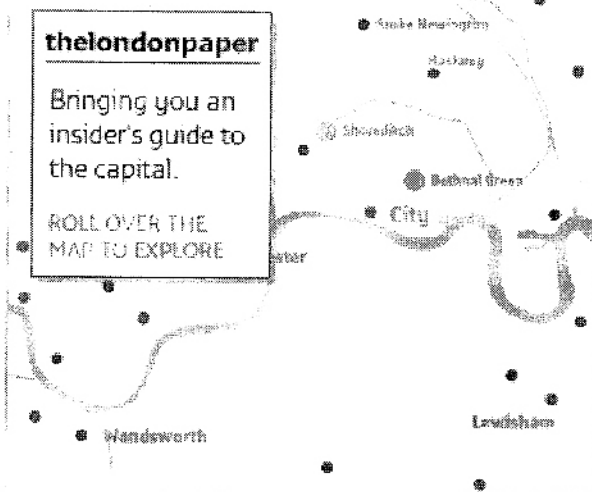
(US \$26.95). - 1 4039 0317 4.

— Advertisement —

THE HUNGARIANS. A thousand years of victory in defeat. Paul Lendvai. Translated by Ann Major. 572pp. Hurst. Paperback, Pounds 16.95. - 1 85065 682 7.

US: Princeton University Press. \$29.95. -

0 691 11406 4



East Central Europe is -or rather used to be, before the recent ethnic purges -a cauldron of nations and cultures. Why then write purely national histories, especially when Europe as a whole is moving towards unification? Because, as the authors of these two books make very clear, regional cooperation has never been more than a dream. Also, because many states in the area, Hungary included, have been in existence for a thousand years, and most of the important events in the region were recorded as taking place in one or another of these states. Whether we like it or not, the history of East Central Europe is that of individual countries, and the peoples who have inhabited the vast regions between the Baltic Sea and the Aegean often had less to do with one another,

culturally, politically and economically, than with their mighty neighbours:

Germany, Russia, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire. In the case of these books by Laszlo Kontler and Paul Lendvai, the writing of national histories is further justified by the erudition and intellectual brilliance of the authors.

To this one must add, as a special attraction, the charm, wit and healthy cynicism of The Hungarians by Lendvai.

Because Hungary is small and its citizens feel themselves to be woefully misunderstood by others, the writing of the nation's history in a foreign language has long been a favourite pastime, whether by sympathetic foreigner or native historian. I have counted fifteen one-volume histories of Hungary in English, with, as a first, the Irishman Lawrence Godkin's lovingly illustrated History of Hungary and the Magyars from the Earliest Period to the Close of the Late War, which appeared in London in 1853. The liberal Godkin was as enthusiastic about the "late war", that is, the Hungarian revolution and war of independence in 1848-9, as are Lendvai and Kontler today. Also, like the two modern authors, Godkin is critical of the naivety and self-absorption of the country's politicians and public.

ar  
sp  
tit  
...  
D  
CI  
yc  
di  
th  
iP  
M

Page 1 || Page 2 || Page 3



Ads by Google
<p><b>Cosmologists Discover God</b>  Perfect Cosmic Balance Proves God Read "The God Hypothesis" for Proof  <a href="http://www.MichaelACorey.com">www.MichaelACorey.com</a></p>
<p><b>Oregon Trail Wagon Train</b>  Make the Most of Your Vacation: Get the Truth. Then Go.  <a href="http://www.TripAdvisor.com">www.TripAdvisor.com</a></p>
<p><b>Heythrop College</b>  University of London Philosophy Theology Psychology  <a href="http://www.heythrop.ac.uk">www.heythrop.ac.uk</a></p>

NEWS | COMMENT | BUSINESS | SPORT | LIFE & STYLE | ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Contact our advertising team for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times. This service is provided on Times Newspapers' standard Terms and Conditions. Please read our Privacy Policy. To inquire about a or The Sunday Times, click here. © Copyright Times Newspapers Ltd



# TIMES ONLINE

SUBSCRIBER  
ARCHIVE

THE TLS

Home

TLS Highlights

Subscribe

Subscriber Archive

Letters to the Editor

TLS Table

Noticeboard

About Us

FAQs

Contact Us

How to Advertise

## TLS THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Page 1 || Page 2 || Page 3

The Hungarians' national story began somewhere in the Ural Mountains, and has continued through many more tragedies and defeats than successes and victories.

Miraculously, however, the state and the nation have survived, although between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries they were merely an autonomous part of the Habsburg possessions. No less surprising is the survival of the Hungarian language and culture in a sea of Germanic and Slavic tongues. On the other side, the much-vaunted Hungarian race, seen by some as talented, charmingly wild and irresistibly hospitable, and by others as cruel, primitive and oppressive, has existed only in the imagination of its friends and enemies; Hungarians are made up of a huge variety of ethnic groups, and their celebrated positive characteristics reflect merely a public image carefully cultivated by the historic Hungarian landed nobility.

Kontler, who is a historian at Central European University in Budapest, wrote his book in English; Paul Lendvai, who is a well-known public intellectual of Hungarian origin and who lives today in Vienna, wrote *The Hungarians in German* (several editions have been published in that

language as well as translations into Hungarian and other languages); it has now been translated into elegant English by Ann Major, of Sydney, Australia, who combines her perfect mastery of Hungarian, German and English with her training as a professional

— Advertisement —

9	7	5	8	4	6	2	1	3	
4	6	8	1	2	3	9	5	7	
1	2	3	7	9	5	6	4	8	
3	5	2		8	7	1	6	9	
6	4	9	3		2		7	5	
7	8	1			9	4	3	2	
8	9	7	6	3	1	5	2	4	
5	1	4	2	7	8	3	9	6	
2	3	6	9	5	4	7	8	1	

FREE TO PLAY. FULL TIMES PUZZLES

historian.

Kontler argues that even in the Middle Ages, that is, before the Ottoman invasion of the sixteenth century, when Hungary was often perceived as a formidable European power, it was woefully backward in comparison with countries in Western and South-Western Europe. Clearly, however, it was not as backward as its neighbours in the Balkans. In the fifteenth century, when the great King Matthias Corvinus assembled some of the best Italian humanists, architects and book illustrators in his magnificent Buda Castle, Renaissance humanism at the King's court was, according to Kontler, "not the tip of the iceberg of a generally flourishing culture, but the rather isolated initiative of an intellectual elite amidst circumstances of relative backwardness".

Moreover, so Kontler argues, during the sixteenth century even these tentative achievements were frittered away when the so-called second serfdom was instituted, fatally strengthening the power of the vast landed nobility and weakening the cities. Hungary's unfortunate geographic location on the fringes of Western civilization, as well as 150 years of Ottoman occupation of central and southern Hungary, combined with nearly incessant warfare, only aggravated this situation.

Kontler believes that in Hungary, as in Eastern Europe in general, political, economic and cultural developments were not organic but were mainly a response to challenges from the West. Still, as he writes in his thorough study, Hungarians "were able to forge merits and advantages in strictly adverse circumstances". In contrast to Kontler's rigorous analysis, strongly recommended to advanced students of history, Paul Lendvai's book is conceived, as the title itself makes clear, in the more light-hearted tradition of Luigi Barzini's famous *Italians* (1964). However, unlike Barzini, Lendvai puts more emphasis on the historical developments and less on the contemporary characteristics of the people he is studying. Although no less entertaining and stimulating than Barzini, his work is more fact-based and less speculative.

The subtitle of Lendvai's book refers to Hungary's continued existence as a nation-state squeezed between Germans and Austrians, Russians and South Slavs.

It also refers to the contradictions between individual genius and repeated national failure, the recurring tragic conflicts between the defence of nationhood and Messianic nationalism. As Lendvai points out, Hungarians often engaged in hero-worship which they combined with charges of betrayal, as, for instance, in the cases of Louis Kossuth, a great national leader in 1848-9 but a person of extraordinary selfishness, and General Arthur Gorgey. The latter, according to Marx and Engels, was the greatest military genius of mid-nineteenth-century Europe; Kossuth branded him the Judas of Hungary, in order to save his own tainted prestige and reputation. Lendvai's portrayal of the Kossuth-Gorgey controversy is one of the

ar  
sp  
tit  
...  
D  
CI  
yc  
di  
th  
iP  
M

# TIMES ONLINE

SUBSCRIBER ARCHIVE

THE TLS

Home

TLS Highlights

Subscribe

Subscriber Archive

Letters to the Editor

TLS Table

Noticeboard

About Us

FAQs

Contact Us

How to Advertise

## TLS THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Page 1 || Page 2 || Page 3

Both books deserve praise for their even-handed approach to the sensitive issues of nationalism and foreign domination. Lendvai makes skilful use of literary sources to illustrate the Hungarian preoccupation with the death of the nation, as well as their image of themselves and of their neighbours, which veered between the nobility of ideas and chauvinism. Some of his recurring themes, such as the complexities of nationalism and of modernization, are relevant today and have an impact far beyond Hungary. A special chapter is devoted to the immensely successful emigre Hungarians in the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere who played a decisive role in science, the arts and business. Here, however, the author might have raised the question of whether the vastly overwhelming presence of Jews among the Hungarian emigre scientists, scholars, musicians and filmmakers should not be studied as a separate Jewish phenomenon.

Such geniuses and near-geniuses as, for instance, Edward Teller, Eugen Wigner, Leo Szilard, John von Neumann, Theodor von Karman, Andrew Grove, Michael and Karl Polanyi, Karl Mannheim, the mathematician Pal Erdos, Adolph Zukor, George Cukor, Joe Pasternak, Michel Curtiz, Sir Alexander Korda, Leslie Howard, Ferenc Molnar, Arthur Koestler, George Szell, Sir Georg Solti, Georg Lukacs, Marcel Breuer, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the photographers Andre Kertesz, Brassai and Robert Capa, Joseph Pulitzer and George Soros were all of Jewish origin. The question therefore is not why so many Hungarians proved to be successful but why so many Jewish Hungarians achieved greatness. I can only suggest that this plethora of triumphant emigre lives was due to that peculiar Hungarian

— Advertisement —

Exclusive offers on **TIMESONLINE**

 TRAVEL	 HOME & GARDEN
 GADGETS	 FOOD & WINE

**TIMESONLINE**

combination of a superb and supremely liberal educational system, especially before the First World War, and the spread of vicious anti-Semitism in the inter-war era.

Both praiseworthy books conclude on a moderately optimistic note, registering, nevertheless, the existence of chauvinism and anti-Semitism in Hungary. They point out, however, that these remain minority movements, as they do in the rest of industrialized Europe, of which Hungary is now an integral and indispensable part.

Page 1 || Page 2 || Page 3



ar  
sp  
tit  
...  
D  
...  
CI  
yc  
di  
th  
iP  
M

Ads by Google
<b>Spiritual Ethics</b> Explore A Fresh Persepctive On Principles, Life, Truth And Love <a href="http://www.vision.org">www.vision.org</a>
<b>Oregon Trail Wagon Train</b> Make the Most of Your Vacation: Get the Truth. Then Go. <a href="http://www.TripAdvisor.com">www.TripAdvisor.com</a>
<b>Heythrop College</b> University of London Philosophy Theology Psychology <a href="http://www.heythrop.ac.uk">www.heythrop.ac.uk</a>

NEWS | COMMENT | BUSINESS | SPORT | LIFE & STYLE | ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Contact our advertising team for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times. This service is provided on Times Newspapers' standard Terms and Conditions. Please read our Privacy Policy. To inquire about a or The Sunday Times, click here. © Copyright Times Newspapers Ltd