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Laszlo Kontler, *A History of Hungary: Millennium in Central Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2002, 527 pp., reviewed by Marko Attila Hoare

Perceptions of the international dimension of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed have been distorted by numerous myths and stereotypes. Among these have been myths of 'historical friendships' between former-Yugoslav countries and various foreign powers. The myth of the 'historical Serb-Russian friendship' was a lie that contained a grain of truth, insofar as during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Russian statesmen and nationalists had at times championed the cause of the Orthodox Slavs of the Balkans; nevertheless, since Russia betrayed the Serbian cause in 1878 by selecting Bulgaria as its favourite Balkan satellite, Russia and Serbia have more often than not been enemies than friends. By contrast, the 'historical Croat-German friendship' was pure myth; an ignorant misinterpretation of Hitler's opportunistic decision to establish a Great Croatian puppet state in 1941 – an act that had no precedent whatsoever in prior Nazi, let alone German, policy toward the Balkans.

Nevertheless, some traditional friendships between states may have affected the course of the Yugoslav crisis. German and Slovene nationalists had been at loggerheads under Austria-Hungary; nevertheless Austria's support for Slovenia in 1990-91 may have derived in part from a sense of affinity between two historically and culturally close nations. Greece's support for Serbia stemmed from a tradition of alliance between the two nations going back to the common struggle against the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria in 1912-13. Yet it is Hungary's support for Croatia in 1990-91 that has been least remarked upon. Croatia was linked to the Hungarian crown from 1102 until 1918 – a period of over eight-hundred years – and the Croatian chequerboard coat-of-arms still adorns public buildings in Budapest today. Such a relationship did not imply friendship, any more than did the historical relationship between England and Ireland – Croatian nationalism indeed arose in opposition to Hungarian domination. Yet the Hungarians more than any other nation had reason to remember Croatia's existence as a kingdom before the birth of Yugoslavia in 1918. And it was Hungary through which the largest portion of imported arms

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reached the fledgling Croatian National Guard in the run-up to the Yugoslav war.

Like Venice and the Ottoman and Austrian Empires, Hungary was a state whose own history was closely affected by its interaction with and domination of South Slavic peoples. In Laszlo Kontler's *History of Hungary* we now have an excellent, up-to-date textbook history of Hungary, one that scholars of the South Slavs may consult with profit. It is interesting to read, for example, that beside the well known and prominent participation of Serbs and Croats in the Habsburgs' war against Hungary in 1848-49 were some who fought prominently for the other side: the thirteen Hungarian generals executed by the Habsburgs on 6 October 1849 included Serbs and Croats as well as Magyars. During World War II Hungary's behaviour was slightly less shameful than that of its German, Italian and Romanian allies, nevertheless the most infamous of its army's atrocities was, according to Kontler, the massacre of over three thousand civilians at Novi Sad in Vojvodina in January 1942. On the other hand, a few months earlier the Hungarian Prime Minister Count Pal Teleki had shot himself rather than lead his country into war with Yugoslavia.

Kontler provides some interesting glimpses of the ambiguous Hungarian attitude toward the Croats. The Croats were the only Hungarian subject people whose nationality the Hungarian liberals on the eve of 1848 were ready to acknowledge – on account of their being viewed as a 'historic' nation. Despite the bitter clash between the Croatian and Hungarian national movements that followed, the Croats received a considerable degree of autonomy from the Hungarian-Croatian agreement (Nagodba) of 1868 on account of the 'historical legitimacy' of their claims to self-government. By the

end of World War I, as the defeated Hungarians were negotiating with their former subject peoples, 'Croat claims were deemed justified by practically everyone in Hungary', according to Kontler.

Just as the Hungarian-Croatian conflict was winding down, however, the Serbian acquisition of territory in present-day Vojvodina added a new dimension to the Hungarian-Serb conflict. The Serbs of Vojvodina had, like the Croats, struggled for autonomy against the Hungarians and had fought alongside the Croats in 1848-49. Yet the Hungarians' conflict with Serbia and the Serbs remained explosive after 1918, with the Hungarian invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941 and subsequent persecution of the Serb population of Bačka and Baranja. The Hungarian minority was well treated in Tito's Yugoslavia, but Kontler notes: 'It was in the late 1980s, along with the tightening of the Yugoslav regime under Slobodan Milošević as well, that mass harassment of the Hungarians of Vojvodina started, culminating in the lifting of the autonomy of the area in 1991.' [sic.—the virtual abolition of Vojvodina's autonomy actually took place in 1989].

Naturally the South Slavs occupy only a small place in Kontler's narrative, but Kontler treats them, along with Hungary's other subject peoples, with much sensitivity and fairness. His book is balanced, comprehensive, well written and well structured – a valuable addition to the historiography of Central Europe.

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