THE HUNGARIANS IN EUROPE:
A THOUSAND YEARS ON THE FRONTIER
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMUS HUNGARICUS

Psalmus Hungaricus is a three-volume synthesis of Hungarian cultural history presented by the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Loránd Eötvös Research Network in Budapest. It is the most comprehensive overview of the Hungarian past ever published in English. Authors and editors include the most prominent experts in their fields. Targeting both scholars and the general public, the work embraces the entire history of the Hungarian nation and state from the earliest beginnings to the end of the twentieth century. Cultural history is interpreted in the broadest possible meaning of the concept encompassing the artistic, economic, literary, political, and social political milieu of Hungarian civilization. Acccordingly, the nine chronological chapters cover political, social and economic history, the history of the language, arts and literature, folk beliefs, religions and churches, physical and political geography, science, technology, manners, and everyday life in their respective ages.

Our introduction discusses some of the key issues covered by the three volumes in great detail.

Two Narratives

When addressing Hungarian history, the first difficulty we encounter is that actually it is two stories. One is that of the Hungarian people, and the other that of the Hungarian state. To complicate matters even further, Hungary has never been inhabited by Hungarians alone, and many Hungarians lived, and still do, outside its borders. Our history takes on a special dynamic from the congruencies and divergences of these two narratives through the centuries. In the Middle Ages, Hungary was regarded as a great power, but for 150 years starting in the middle of the sixteenth century, it was divided into three parts. Hungarian statehood found its place within the Habsburg Monarchy, and after the First World War, Hungarians first got a taste of being a small state. Interruptions and fundamental reorganizations have constantly attended the life of Hungarians. In the twentieth century alone, we have gone through nine changes in the form of state or the political system. In other words, every twentieth-century generation has had to get used to at least three or four different systems, not to mention occasional shifts within the system. Nonetheless, despite historical changes that have become increasingly frequent as we approach the present, it is long-term continuity that is most important. Where should we seek the beginnings of these changes and continuities?

Which Part of Europe Does Hungary Belong to?

The oriental ethnic group that became known as the Hungarians formed in the first millennium BC. From being hunters and fishers, they became horse-riding nomads herding large animals on the steppe, and subsequently settled as farmers. They migrated from their original homeland beyond the Urals to the South Russian-Ukrainian steppe and, during the ninth century (some say partly in the fifth and sixth centuries), to their present homeland. Originally a Finno-Ugrian people, they had acquired Turkish material culture, music and faith (of which a memory is their most widespread foreign name: Onogur→vengerski, Ungarn, Hungarian, hongrois), when they came to their final homeland.

Throughout all of these metamorphoses, the basic characteristics that made them a people displayed an unparalleled continuity. Over three thousand years, they have managed to retain their system of symbols (above all the language) and distinguish and separate themselves from other peoples, as manifested in their enduring name for themselves, Magyar. (In modern German usage, for example, *Ungarn* usually denotes the country, and *Magyaren/Madjaren* the people.) Only one or two other former steppe peoples can boast such an achievement.

Upon their conquest of the Carpathian Basin, the Hungarians found themselves in the geographical centre of Europe, and started to participate in Western, or European, civilization. This civilization has been summed up by the French philosopher Rémy Brague as essentially consisting of Roman roots and an emerging Latinity, and Latin Christianity. The essence of this "Roman model" is continuous renewal through the rediscovery and reinterpretation of old cultural heritage and the passing on of old traditions to the constantly-changing present. Consequently, the history of Europe is a series of renaissances, through which it has constantly expanded territorially and intellectually and developed unparalleled abilities of self-reflection. This has given rise to the capability of constant renewal, the creation of dynamic structures and – its most important and most individual feature – the separation of the spiritual and the temporal (ultimately, of church and state). Having settled in geographical Central Europe, the Hungarians initially put out feelers to Byzantium but eventually joined Latin Europe, the *respublica Christiana*. Ever since, Hungary has been part of the constant renaissance that characterizes life in the West. Romanesque and Gothic art, Humanism, Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, the avant-garde, etc. have without exception, if sometimes with some delay or reduced intensity and prevalence, appeared and taken effect in Hungary. (Indeed, a more complete set of styles appeared here than in Italy or France, for example.) The furthest reach of the Gothic style clearly marks out the borders of the European *Occidens*, and it coincides exactly with the eastern edges of old Hungary.

Hungary thus became part of Latin Europe, but has always remained at the outer frontiers. Its borders were the political and military boundaries of the *Occidens*, beyond which Byzantine civilization stretched out to the east and south. Hungary earned widespread respect in repulsing the long series of attacks by Eastern peoples from beyond the Carpathians and the southern river borders, and developed into one of the largest and strongest states of contemporary Europe. The Latin West regarded the Hungarian kings as "defenders of Christendom," "champions of Christ," etc., and the country as the "gateway to the east". Never forgetting their oriental roots, Hungary's people and leaders always chose the West, whatever the price. This happened during the Mongol Invasion of 1241–42 and the time of Ottoman Turkish occupation, when the wars fought to defend the country and the West led to demographic and political catastrophes for Hungary.

There is of course a line of argument, especially in the historiography of some Balkan countries, that denies Hungary's Westernness. Even some Hungarian scholars, notably the internationally-renowned Jenő Szűcs, who divide Europe into three historical parts and place Hungary in "middle" Europe. But a brief comparison of the late medieval Hungarian and Balkan states, as has been made by Pál Engel, immediately demonstrates why Hungary should be regarded as part of the West.

The first difference is in the role of the church. The adoption and development of intellectual currents displayed by the Hungarian church were not paralleled in the Balkans. Hungarian bishops were ecclesiastical princes, with enormous estates and political functions, while in the Orthodox world, the bishops lived in monasteries and were part of the state rather than an independent body. Secondly, there were enormous differences in the secular institutions. Hungary was from the beginning a state entity (*corpus*) with a stable structure, while the Balkan states were territorially fluid. The Kingdom of Hungary had well-established state symbols: the Holy Crown symbolized continuity and strength of the state body. The coronation developed with well-defined ritual and criteria, and the state had

well-defined armorial bearings. Hungary's statehood did not face danger even when there was a break in royal power. These features were all absent in the Balkans. Hungary's stability largely rested on a system of estates that provided hierarchical representation of political groupings (*universitates*) headed by the king (*caput*), and together they passed the laws of the land through the diets. This did not exist in the Balkans. Latin literacy, the other component of institutional stability, was much more advanced in Hungary than in the Balkans and left several times as much to posterity. Urban autonomy based on Roman law was established and – by European comparison – very widespread in Hungary. There were even a few true (royal) towns surrounded by villages. No such towns existed in the Balkans, castle and town were distinguished much later – by adoption of the Hungarian word *varoš* (Rom. *oraş*). In medieval Hungary, the peasant had the legal status of *Hörige* and enjoyed *Freizügigkeit* privileges, while in the Balkans, he was bonded and subject to corvee labour.

This is perhaps enough to convey the deep correspondences of structure and content that underpin Hungary's classification as Western, in contrast with the Orthodox-Slavic world. This does not mean that Hungary reached the same stage of development at all times or in every respect. The difference can most clearly be perceived in the Romanesque or Gothic churches in small Hungarian villages: they had the same structure as churches in French village churches, but in size and ornament, they look like reduced copies.

Paradoxically, it was during the period of the dual monarchy, when Hungary was closest to Western Europe, that some of its elite turned to the East. This was partly due to the influence of European "Orientalism", but a crucial factor was the rediscovery of the Hungarian people's Eastern origins. Interest in the Eastern character took effect in developing the nation-building strategy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Two conceptions clashed in Hungary at that time. One was the "nation-state" concept, which regarded all of the ethnic groups in Hungary, rather than just the Magyars, as part of the Hungarian nation. This put the stress on citizenship in its definition of the nation. The other was the "cultural nation" concept, which saw the nation as residing in the community defined by shared ethnic origin and language. This placed great significance on folk culture, an area of discovery at the time, which was seen as the imprint of ancient – oriental – Hungarian culture. Another contributory theme was an attitude that had been gathering strength since the Ottoman invasion, the feeling of "aloneness", and the fear of stronger Western nations (including the Austrians) and the increasingly assertive ideologies of pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism. Feelings of ethnic isolation prompted patriotic Hungarians to seek support and refuge in the East, to which they reached out with great enthusiasm and curiosity, identifying there the ancient forms of the Hungarian character and soul. This accounts for the popularity, after the turn of the twentieth century, of "Turanist" and "pan-Turanist" ideas (which actually became most prominent in the Ottoman Empire). Turanism offered nations who felt threatened and friendless with the hope of finding a place in a community or, more daringly, of setting up a great Eurasian empire. The intensifying draw of the East set off a reaction among followers of the Western orientation, and in the ensuing debate, the concepts of East and West took on symbolic significance. Thus in 1905, the poet Endre Ady described Hungary as a ferry country that plies back and forth between the banks of East and West. Politicians and intellectuals committed to the idea of the nation-state stood by the Habsburg Monarchy and Western orientation, and historians refuted oriental romanticism with historical arguments. Gyula Szekfű, for example, a prominent historian in both the dualist and Horthy eras, described the conflicts in Hungary between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries as the clash of two civilizations, East and West, diverting the Hungarian nation and state from its main course of development. The Hungarian government between the two world wars also revived the old idea of the "bulwark of Christendom" with a view to bolstering the country's role in defence against the Bolsheviks. It was an irony of fate that after the Second World War, Hungary became the western bastion of the communist world. Since then, heavyweight intellectuals have continued to

ponder the question of what makes Hungarians what they are. Do they belong to East or to West? Many people in the European Union, but also within Hungary, look on in bewilderment at the recent foreign policy of "opening to the East," with occasional but highly visible breaks from Western allies and their expectations. Also attracting international attention is the new oriental romanticism that has gained great popularity in some sections of Hungarian society. It includes such ideas as neo-Turanism, which is usually – but perhaps erroneously – associated with extreme right-wing political groups. The experience of a thousand years on the frontier and particularly of the Ottoman occupation have engendered reflexes that inevitably cause the Eastern orientation, like an underground stream, to spring to the surface from time to time, but it has never seriously challenged the country's western alignment and commitment.

Having looked at Hungary's general situation in Europe and the search for its true place, now let us look at the fundamental institutional and structural elements that have ensured continuity and stability among the constant changes of Hungarian history.

The Building Blocks of Continuity

The Form of State and System of Laws

In 1191, the English court chaplain Giraldus Cambrensis wrote a chronicle about a journey to Wales made by Archbishop Balduin some time previously. He wrote that the journey took place when Urban was pope, Frederick was the German emperor, Isaac was Byzantine emperor, Philip was king of France, Henry was king of England, *Béla ruled in Hungary*, and Saladin took Jerusalem. The list illustrates the respect enjoyed by the Hungarian state founded by Saint Stephen, a respect that seems astonishing from today's perspective. In the Árpádian and Angevin ages, the Hungarian state wielded greater power in its own territory than Western states did in theirs. This power was based on a system of castles, castle domains and royal counties that the king granted to his main followers (*barones*) as "official fiefs" (*Amstlehen*). The castle domain was a form of administrative organization that afforded the kings almost absolute power, but it began to disintegrate in the second half of the fourteenth century, whereupon the nobles made determined progress towards feudal organization. The Hungarian state organization followed the opposite route to its Western counterparts: in France, for example, the king gradually built up control over the country between 1200 and 1500 by extending the royal *domaines* and absorbing feudal estates, while in Hungary, the estates with political rights – the "country" – extended their influence over the state. The ideology for the changeover to feudal dualist government was drawn from the doctrine of the Holy Crown. This was one of the earliest and longest-lived symbolic conception of state in Europe (and in many respects survives in the present), expressing rule abstracted from royal power, a kingdom that transcends dynasties, and territorial unity. After the middle of the fifteenth century, the crown of Saint Stephen was not the possession of the king but the "holy crown of the country". A king could be legitimate only if invested with this crown by the consent of the representatives of the inhabitants of the country (the estates). Hungary thus became an elective monarchy and developed a two-pole legal and political system based on cooperation between the king and the estates, the court and the noble diet. It survived as such right up to 1918. The principles underlying the system were laid down by István Werbőczy in his famous *Tripartitum opus* in 1514, the "original Hungarian constitution", defining the legal equality of magnates and lower nobility and of the ecclesiastical and secular estates, and the fundamental rights of the nobility. Werbőczy thereby took a great strides towards widening the political base, a development regarded as one of the principal ingredients of early modernity. He was similarly innovative in laying down the right of equal inheritance for male children, which in some Western states was introduced only in the

nineteenth century as a demand of bourgeois democracy (and a device for limiting the power of the aristocracy). Werbőczy set off progress towards legality, constitutionality and national sovereignty by underlining the need for cooperation between the king and the (noble) nation in exercising the power of making laws. The established and still-dominant historiographical assessment, however, does not properly appreciate the true value and novelty of this achievement and tends to regard Werbőczy as the symbol and indeed the main cause of immovability and backwardness. For the historians of Central and Eastern Europe, the strong and sometimes coercive "absolutist state" became the standard, the model, even though only a few early modern states met the – subsequently-formulated – criteria. It is not inconceivable that the Hungarian and Polish road to state-building might have led to a completely different Central Europe if the Ottoman occupation had not constantly diverted the course of political and social change in Hungary.

Having emerged and consolidated in the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the system became increasingly ossified under the influence of Ottoman occupation and the constraints imposed by Habsburg rule (of which more later), and by the end of the nineteenth century, it was failing to meet the demands of the age. The next step, which was to extend noble rights to the whole of society, took place later and less completely than elsewhere in Europe. The forms of modern constitutionality – a system of representation, parliamentarianism and legal accountability of government – were put in place in 1848 and 1867, but the crown retained some of its autocratic rights, mainly in military and foreign affairs. The Hungarian parliament worked more or less as it had in the early modern age: the diets remained the forum for negotiations with the king (*dietalis tractatus*). No parliamentary system of government emerged, the majority principle was not applied, and the monarch remained on equal rank in the legislature. He decided who to appoint to the head of government and who should be in the cabinet. Whereas in the West, the principle of legal presumption (*die rechtliche Vermuthung/praesumptio iuris*) favoured the individual (where the law did not prescribe, the citizen was free), in Hungary, the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*) was only partly implemented. Legal presumption stemmed from the right of the state rather than of the individual, and parliament did not fully provide for the rights of citizens. Instead, the representatives and organs of state power (minister, county, etc.) prescribed the rights of individuals and social groups by discretionary decrees. The citizen – to quote Montesquieu – could be forced into something that was "not compelled by law," and prohibited from doing something "that the law permitted". László Péter put it like this: in Hungary, the constitution was free but the individual was not. Not even the post-First World War collapse and revolutions brought meaningful change, even though the loss of the throne deprived the Hungarian constitution of much of its function. The communist regime that took power after 1945 destroyed whatever progress there had been to the division of power and established an Eastern European-type despotic state. Following their reorganization after 1990, Hungarian state institutions now basically comply with all the requirements of the rule of law in every respect. But the thousand-year traditions and reflexes did not, and could not, disappear from one day to the next. A strong, effective state is regarded in some political circles and broad sections of society to be the main guarantee of national sovereignty, self-determination and social peace. Accordingly, Hungarian citizens often tend to look to the state to solve a large part of their problems, which explains the broad public support for the exercise of power in a way that looks authoritarian to outsiders. Another question is why Hungary is customarily judged more harshly for such phenomena than the average European country. A good example is the Horthy era, of which a very dark picture emerged and persists in both Hungarian and international historiography and memory politics. Recent analyses by historians and political scientists by comparison with other European political systems of the time have resulted in a picture that is far from being positive, though much more nuanced.

The Multiethnic State: Peoples and Nations in Hungary

Until it fell in 1918, the old Hungary was always an "empire" of many elements, inhabited by many ethnic groups. The original conquerors were themselves of mixed origin, and the country constantly received immigrants from the beginning of the rule of the Árpád dynasty onwards. The first groups to arrive from the east were the Jews, the Khwarezmians and the Pechenegs, followed in the thirteenth century by the Cumans, the Jazygians and the Romanians (Vlachs). From the west, successive waves of German, Wallonian and Italian *hospites* were settled on royal estates. The Western settlers were by "right of hospitality" allowed to retain their customs in their chosen land. The *hospites* brought much to the country: the Walloons, for example, laid the foundation for what was to become the world famous grapes and wine of Tokaj, and the Saxons of Transylvania and Upper Hungary (today Spiš, Slovakia) played a defining role in the establishment of towns in Hungary and the adoption of Western urban and ethnic-regional autonomies.

Just when the ethnic Hungarian population of this multiethnic country was undergoing an ethnic expansion in the fifteenth century, the Ottoman conquerors appeared at the borders and, soon afterwards, in the interior. The devastation and population shifts caused by military actions, together with the Ottoman regime established in the heart of Hungary, caused fundamental changes in ethnic distribution. As ethnic Hungarians thinned out where the wars were fought, their place was taken by Serbs moving in from the south, Romanians from the east and Slovaks from the north. In the seventeenth century, new ethnic groups from the Balkans and Armenians from Transylvania arrived in Hungary in large numbers. A mass of German settlers brought in to make up for the reduced population further coloured the ethnic map of the country in the eighteenth century.

Despite this, we rarely find any examples of ethnic clashes in Hungary before the eighteenth century. It was natural to identify with more than one ethnic group (a fine example being the Zrínyi family), and in areas populated by ethnic groups, the lord would normally speak with his peasants in their mother tongue. The section of society that held political rights, the "noble nation" (*natio hungarica*), imbued nearly every other social and ethnic group with their own worldview and understanding of history, and until the formation of nations, the great majority of the country's inhabitants regarded themselves as *hungarus*, loyal subjects of the kingdom, without feeling any contradiction with their own ethnic identity. Speaking Hungarian was not a condition of belonging to the noble nation. There were substantial groups of Romanian and Slovakian nobility who proudly declared themselves part of the Hungarian nation, which they conceived as a community of origin and values. An illustrative example is the family of the firebrand leader of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, Lajos Kossuth. The mother tongue of his forebears was Slovak, although Hungarian was the spoken language in his family. His father, László Kossuth chose a German-born wife, which is probably why they kept their Lutheran religion even as the speaking of Slovakian passed out of the family. His uncle, György Kossuth, possessed both Hungarian noble (*hungarus*) and Slovak national identity, and gave real support to one branch of the Slovak national movement. According to Domokos Kosáry, who quotes Slovak historians, György Kossuth "as a defender of noble privileges was angry at his nephew, saying that it would have been better, if he had drowned in the garden pond when he spent his childhood summers with them".[1] Until the modern national ideal began to gain ground (and partly afterwards, as the example of the Kossuth family shows), the Hungarian nobility was an institution capable of providing cohesion in a heterogeneous country. This was neatly expressed by the great Hungarian writer, Kálmán Mikszáth at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "Because the Hungarian nobility was a wise political institution in its time. It was the blood-collecting basin. If somebody earned respect in any area, he

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1   Domokos Kosáry, *Kossuth Lajos a reformkorban* [Lajos Kossuth in the Age of Reform], Budapest, 2002, 27.

piled up some kind of assets, either intellectual or material, that represented strength, be he Romanian or German, he was taken into the fort right away, for if there's strength, let it be inside. That's why this nation has survived so long. Because an outsider who could have done something against it was let in among them. The weak and the impotent stayed outside. Wise men were our forebears, you must give them that. […] The Hungarian nobility was not a sheer, cold wall that kept the privileged class from the people. It had a gate, with a great wide arch, so that all that was of merit would get through it."[2] Even in the nineteenth century, the Hungarian world had an unbelievable power of attraction and assimilation. The world-renowned writer Sándor Márai, whose ancestors came to Hungary in the time of Maria Theresia, had this to say: "These inspectors, consiliarii, prefects, treasury domain and mine managers were already corresponding in Hungarian at the beginning of the last century (when noble Hungarian families, especially the magnates, still preferred to write in German or Latin!), this immigrant clan spoke and felt Hungarian; all the more astonishing because the family owed all of its privileges and positions to the emperor, and it was just a hundred years earlier that they left Saxony!"[3]

This *hungarus* world gradually crumbled in the nineteenth century. The changeover from multiethnic empires to multinational empires invalidated one of the basic doctrines of Hungarian political thinking: that only the Hungarians had the strength and ability to take the political lead in the Carpathian Basin. Elites that were maturing their ethnic groups' national awareness into political movements were not aiming for acculturation or assimilation. They wanted their own political entities. The eastern half of the Habsburg Empire, structured on Hungarian political traditions and political culture, inhibited the growth of their cultural and economic strength and their political influence and social prestige. Their activity contributed to the decline of the dual monarchy. The disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy tore apart an institutional framework that had ripened through centuries of coexistence among peoples of diverse ethnicity, religion and language. The new state system that emerged after 1918, despite the rhetoric of national self-determination, was unable to establish better or more durable structures for the coexistence of peoples in the Carpathian Basin.

Religions and Churches in Hungary

The medieval and early modern Kingdom of Hungary had unparalleled religious diversity. During the rule of the Árpád dynasty, besides the Latin Christian majority and the Orthodox Christian minority, there were several non-Christian groups in the country: Jews, Muslims and "pagans". These came in voluntarily, and continuously, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, finding a place they could live and practise their religions with a freedom that was unknown elsewhere. The Jews served the ruling house as merchants and men of finance; some Muslims had similar functions and others served as soldiers. In exchange, they enjoyed royal protection even against the papacy or the Christian Church in Hungary. Around 1150, King Géza allowed Muslims to practise polygamy and keep concubines. There is a record from around 1220 that Muslim students from Hungary visited the schools of Aleppo in Syria. These groups had assimilated by natural processes by the end of the thirteenth century. Relations between Latin and Orthodox Christians were similarly harmonious. Everyone was aware of, and accepted, the differences in ritual and language, and landlords chose priests for the churches under their patronage according to the faith of the local inhabitants. Before the Reformation, religion and language were not a matter of power, and no conflicts arose from the dissimilarities.

2 Kálmán Mikszáth, "Horváth uram három leánya" [Mr Horváth's Three Daughters], in *Mikszáth Kálmán összes művei. 43. kötet. Elbeszélések XVII. 1898–1903* [Complete Works of Kálmán Mikszáth, vol 43. Short Stories 17, 1898–1903], edited by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and Anna Fábri. Budapest, 2015, 203.
3 Sándor Márai, *Egy polgár vallomásai* [Confessions of a Citizen], Budapest, 2000, 36.

Although the Reformation started up a completely new era, the Hungarian Reformation resulted in a multiconfessional model that has no parallels outside the Carpathian Basin. The Habsburg-ruled Kingdom of Hungary, the Ottoman-vassal Principality of Transylvania, and the Ottoman-controlled central part of Hungary accommodated four different confessions, each with its own organization and a large number of adherents. The Catholic Church survived in all three areas, in differing forms and under different conditions. Alongside it, church organizations were established for the Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist) and – except in the Kingdom – Unitarian faiths. These forged a peculiar state of balance, and by European comparison lived together in relative peace, if under varying legal and institutional constraints. There was never a religious war in Hungary and the very rare violent incidents mainly broke out between Protestant confessions. In Transylvania, the Torda Diet of 1568 was the first in Europe to proclaim the freedom of worship for Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran and Unitarian confessions and to grant free choice of priests. The Transylvanian Diet of 1594 was the first to recognize the four churches as "accepted" (*recepta*) confessions. Such a sustained multiconfessional system, safeguarded by legal and institutional guarantees, did not exist in any other country of Europe. That was because the Transylvanian state was established just at the time when the confessions were forming up, so that as the prince was consolidating his power, he inherited more or less established churches on which he could perhaps impose constraints, but he could not destroy them. The Kingdom of Hungary was a frontier state entity in a complex monarchy that had Catholicism as its state religion. The ruler was obliged to give concessions to his Lutheran and Calvinist subjects, mainly to ensure the operation of the defensive system against the Ottomans and the voluntary recognition of Habsburg rule. In Ottoman Hungary, a community's choice of confession was of interest to the occupiers only to the extent that it affected their consolidation efforts and economic interests. The Hungarian Reformation, and in the wider sense the formation of confessions in the country, may be described as a curiosity of world history. Hungarian society learned about the ideals of European Reformation, but the frontier situation and the unique division of political control caused it to adopt this raw material very creatively and produce something qualitatively new, by permanently instituting and never abolishing multiconfessionality within the state. This caused a great many direct influences to be incorporated into Hungarian culture. Although the same multiconfessionality undoubtedly weakened national solidarity for centuries and intolerance remained, coexistence of dissimilar religious groups at least nurtured the capability to cooperate and – by encouraging a receptive and above all reflective attitude – to perceive things in a more nuanced way.

In the period between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the contradictions that beset the relationship between state and society in general also showed up in religious and church affairs. The monarch had broad powers in religious affairs, and the Catholic Church was closely bound to the crown through the right of patronage (*ius patronatus*). Protestant communities were self-governing but subject to supervision by the crown, and the same was true for the Orthodox church. Protestants in Hungary were popularly associated with the national cause and Catholics were associated with Habsburg interests. Churches did not achieve equal status, and the hierarchical system of privileges that resulted from a combination of common law, royal decrees, ministerial instructions and legislation strengthened rather than relaxed the grip of the state. Consequently, by the end of the nineteenth century, confessions in Hungary were tacitly divided into the categories of "accepted", "recognized" and "tolerated". The "accepted" religions basically comprised the Catholic and Orthodox churches and the three Protestant denominations. The "recognized" religions were Judaism (1867), the Baptist denomination (1905) and, unusually for a European country, indeed the second time on the continent, Islam (1916). The Jewish religion was "promoted" to an accepted religion in 1895, but "demoted" to "recognized" in 1942. Finally, the "tolerated" religions comprised "sects" such as the Nazarenes, which the authorities viewed with suspicion and issued decrees that attempted to shift them towards legality. This system put the churches at the mercy of the secular authorities, which played them off against each other

and prompted them to develop ways of playing the system rather than a critical attitude. The churches therefore adapted to social changes with difficulty, if at all. State control engendered dependence and a false sense of security, for which the churches paid a double price after 1945. It also explains why the churches in Hungary put up less resistance than might have been expected to the ruthless anti-church and anti-religious policies of the communist authorities. After 1990, the pre-1945 condition returned to some extent, although this was partly because the churches had lost their financial base and needed state assistance to perform their social role.

Now we have seen the structures and institutions that underpinned stability and continuity, let us look at the forces that have challenged or broken Hungary's links to the West since the early modern age. The first and most important of these was Ottoman expansion.

Fault Lines and Interruptions

Ottoman Occupation: Three Countries, One Homeland

Hungary suffered its first Ottoman attack in 1390, after which war raged in some corner of its territory almost without pause until the Peace of Passarowitz in 1718. Hungarian resistance was broken at the Battle of Mohács in 1526, and the country suddenly found itself the frontier territory of two great powers. In the ensuing stalemate, they divided Hungary between them. The Habsburg monarch ruled as king of Hungary in the north and west, the Ottoman state in the centre, and the eastern regions became a Hungarian-ruled Ottoman vassal state, the Principality of Transylvania. This shifted the border between East and West to the heart of Hungary, and the system of defensive forts that kept the two powers apart cut right through the middle of the ethnic Hungarian population. Nearly every part of the country became a battleground. Incessant fighting and the militarized way of life destroyed much of the built environment, tore apart the structure of settlement, caused the decline of most urban centres, shifted the centres of economic activity, and resulted in the loss of between seventy and ninety per cent of the population in some regions, mainly in the south. The losses were mainly to the Hungarian population, allowing gains by the ethnic groups living in border areas. These losses reduced the proportion of Hungarians in the multiethnic country from seventy-five or eighty per cent to under fifty per cent by the end of Ottoman rule. It is not without reason that many see the division of Hungary after the First World War as being rooted in these changes. There were similar losses to the Hungarian religious and cultural centres and their institutions. Enormous numbers of noble manors and monasteries were destroyed in lands under Ottoman and Hungarian control, and many parishes also disappeared.

One positive phenomenon was the resilience to the political divisions displayed by the Carpathian Basin economy. In the late sixteenth century, Hungary was the greatest exporter of meat in the world. By the time these exports reached their peak, however, Western demographic expansion had stopped, leading to over-supply and falls in price. Farmers had a reliable market for their grain among the soldiers stationed in the country. The agricultural boom conserved the product structure, however, slowing the growth of manufacturing. The guild system persisted for a long time. The break-up of the country did not destroy the unity of the market in Hungary, and trade widened the horizons of the peasantry and the newly-forming rural middle classes. The openness resulting from trade helped the spread of Protestantism, which as we have seen took place peacefully even amongst the many theological disputes. Overall, the economic, linguistic and intellectual-religious links maintained a sense of unity in the divided country. The Hungarians, as was later observed, lived in three countries but a single homeland.

There were further items on the debit side, however. The ascent of the Habsburgs to the throne of Hungary, despite its long-term dividends, caused the royal court to move out of the country, a

severe break that could only partly be made up for later. This denied the Hungarian people a centre of organization of the kind that provided other Western countries a framework for the modern nation-state in the early modern and modern ages, homogenizing the people and the language and providing cultural patronage. To make just one comparison: in France, the use of French, the language of the court, was made obligatory in state administration in 1539, whereas in Hungary, Hungarian became the official language only in 1844.

The other loss was intellectual, and to understand it is to gain an insight into the Hungarian mindset. The Ottoman conquest ruined the political and cultural self-confidence of the Hungarian elite. The religious and political leaders and the thinkers of the time were gripped by a mixture of guilt and self-accusation. They could not work out how a country that had been the "star of Europe" could have sunk to being the plaything of other countries. They could not forgive themselves for having frittered away an "empire". This is the root of a persistent current in the Hungarian search for identity and political thinking: the tradition of denying responsibility and seeking scapegoats. According to Gáspár Károli, the author of the first full Hungarian Bible translation, the catastrophe was the result of the Hungarians' general sins, while according to the chronicle of peasant-born György Szerémi, it was the fault of infighting among the "lords". According to a Lutheran preacher of Sárvár, the followers of the "stained papist faith" were the main perpetrators, while the leading Hungarian figure of the Counter-Reformation, Péter Pázmány, saw the hand of God in punishing the people for the Reformation.

Given all this, we can say that the collapse of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary was the severest break in the history of the Hungarian state and people. It was a fault line that can be compared only to the collapse following the First World War. Gyula Szekfű may be understood for stating that "This Ottoman rule was the greatest, and perhaps the only, catastrophe in Hungarian history."[4] The next great challenge in the second five hundred years of national and state existence was thus to defend the interests of Hungarian society and a state that had been forced to give up some of its independence, and to develop a relationship with the defining dynasty of the region, the Habsburgs.

Constraints and Opportunities in the Habsburg Empire

The Hungarian national consciousness and collective memory harbour highly contradictory, or simply negative, views of the Habsburg dynasty. In the dominant *"kuruc"* historical approach traditionally ascribed to the Calvinists, one basic doctrine is that the Habsburg acquisition of the crown was at least as big a blow to the Hungarians as the Mongol Invasion or Ottoman or Soviet rule. In this view, the Hungarian state lost is independence in 1526 and regained it in mutilated form between 1918 and 1920; the medieval Hungarian state continued in the Principality of Transylvania, which also became the home of Hungarian-speaking culture, and the anti-Habsburg uprisings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mostly led by Transylvanian princes, were fights for liberty, national independence, and survival.

Over recent decades, Hungarian historiography has fundamentally revised the account that emerged during the National Romantic era. The new narrative describes Habsburg–Hungarian relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a successful compromise deriving from the interdependence of the dynasty and the Hungarian estates, and the uprisings to be enterprises that corrected occasional disturbances to the sensitive political and religious balance. Relations are therefore much better characterized by the series of successful compromises between 1606 and 1867. The "empire of Saint Stephen" did not come to an end in 1526. On the contrary, it remained a separate body within the

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4   Gyula Szekfű, *Magyar történet: A tizenhetedik század* [The Seventeenth Century], in Bálint Hóman–Gyula Szekfű, *Magyar történet* [Hungarian History], 5. Budapest, n.d., 108.

Habsburg Empire, its prestige indicated by its place in political symbolism – second after the Holy Roman Empire.

The Hungarian political elite, although they basically accepted – or were forced to cooperate with – the system, were constantly seeking an arrangement that was more beneficial to themselves. The great dilemma of Hungarian politics and political thinking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was whether to aim for a separate Hungarian state or to further national interests within the Habsburg Empire, and it is still a subject of dispute in modern Hungarian historiography. Although Habsburg economic policy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is widely held to have been adverse for Hungary, Hungarian historians of the period produce more and more arguments that the imperial framework provided the best conditions for the development of modern Hungary. Géza Pálffy, for example, gives this assessment of the 1711 "compromise": "From being a decaying frontier land between two world powers for two hundred years, the Kingdom of Hungary once again became a prominent country in Central Europe, operating within the framework of the monarchy… In spring 1711, [after the failure of Francis Rákóczi's war of independence] […] decline finally gave way to the long-awaited renewal."[5] The truth of this is not diminished by the fact that the territorial integrity of the pre-Mohács country was restored only in 1867, when Transylvania was once more made part of Hungary.

Homeland and Progress

From the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Ottomans were expelled and the state of Hungary was integrated into the Habsburg Empire, right up to the end of the Second World War, or in another sense, until the last Soviet soldier left the Hungarian territory in 1991, Hungarian politics were dominated by the conflicting interpretations of Hungarian national interest. Put most simply, the national issue boiled down to four principle sources of conflict:

– Hungary's place in the Habsburg Empire;
– Hungary and the great powers;
– Hungarians and non-Hungarians in the Habsburg Empire, and after 1918, Hungarian minorities in the successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy;
– The tension between liberalism and nationalism.

Four years are of key significance to all of these sources of conflict: 1848, 1867, 1918 and 1945.

Two phenomena brought the conflicts to come to a head in the revolutionary year of 1848: the Croatian, Serbian, Romanian and Slovakian national movements, and the recovering strength of the counterrevolutionary political forces in Vienna. The confrontation reached its peak with the dethronement of the Habsburgs on 14 April 1849: the form of state was left open, but Lajos Kossuth was elected governor.

In the new international situation following the suppression of the Revolution and War of Independence in 1849, a period marked by Habsburg reprisals, the lower nobility, who had formed the basis of the Age of Reform and the Revolution, were deprived of their economic, social and political strength. The Habsburgs' modernization measures (such as the implementation of the emancipation of the serfs, which had been decided by the revolutionary parliament, and the dissolution of the guild system) was held by many contemporaries, and not without reason, to be aimed at breaking "the backbone of the nation" and engendered very strong – but largely passive – resistance.

Until 1867, political activity in pursuit of national objectives was closely linked to modernization objectives. In the period of dualism, however, the two objectives often came into conflict. In his

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5   Géza Pálffy, *Magyarország két világbirodalom határán (1526–1711)* [Hungary on the Border between Two World Empires], in *Magyarország története* [History of Hungary], edited by Ignác Romsics, Budapest, 2010, 486.

INTRODUCTION

description of dualist-era Hungarian society, Péter Hanák often uses the expression "dual structure". This refers to two Hungarian social hierarchies that existed side by side during these years: the traditional feudal hierarchy with its high prestige, and the bourgeois hierarchy with its burgeoning economic strength. This prevented the emergence of a coherent national middle class, a necessary pillar of modern society. Often regarded by the public as alien and un-Hungarian, the attempts at bourgeois reform often came into conflict with political currents that regarded themselves as representing the interests of the nation. These parties and movements wanted to protect the traditional feudal structures and thereby opposed attempts at modernization, which involved largely assimilated sections of society. This had serious consequences: very few major figures in Hungarian cultural and political life succeeded in reconciling modernization plans with national aspirations, and even they usually got no further than theorizing and planning. The central focus of political life was to promote Hungarian national sovereignty against the Habsburgs and the domestic national minorities. Those who criticized this view for any reason were often accused of "betraying" the interests of the nation. This was experienced by anybody who was positive about elements of Habsburg policy or who proposed moderation in the assimilation policy towards ethnic minorities.

The Compromise of 1867 was the overture to a period of real consolidation in Hungarian history, one that brought prosperity to most sections of society. By the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, Hungarian national liberalism was no longer the driving force of social and economic modernization but increasingly an ossified ideology stubbornly defending the old political and social structures.

Continuities and Discontinuities in the Twentieth Century

The tension between continuities and discontinuities, our main theme here, is best studied through events of the twentieth century, and so we will approach it through the debates in the politics of history and memory following the political transition of 1989–90.

For a nation that experienced, during the twentieth century, nine changes of system, six forms of state, four border revisions, three revolutions and two world wars, and whose country was invaded three times, history is not some abstract academic discourse but a matter of direct public experience that politicians must take into account if they want to succeed. In Hungary's political transition, positions taken on historical themes made definitive contributions to the formation of political parties and their programmes, and to the elucidation of differences between political groups and schools of thought.

Trianon

There is general agreement among politicians of the most diverse ideological stance and historians of all kinds of theoretical and methodological approaches that the decisive event in the twentieth-century history of Hungary was the signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty on 4 June 1920. The Treaty of Trianon forced Hungary to renounce two-thirds of its pre-war territory (its area decreasing from 282,000 to 93,000 square kilometres, not counting Croatia) and one third of the Hungarian-speaking population, 3,327,000 people, in favour of other successor states of the Habsburg Empire. (The population of the country was reduced from 18.2 to 7.6 million). The imposed treaty, which largely ascribed to Hungary the responsibility for starting the war, destroyed the "empire" of Saint Stephen. Hungary's economic and trading system collapsed, and it was even forced to pay reparations. In the 1920s, Hungary had to rebuild its state and its economy from almost nothing. The Hungarian minorities were not given the promised rights of self-determination in any of the successor states. The imposed treaty inevitably engendered revisionist aspirations, leading the country's leaders to a series of bad decisions in the

second half of the 1930s. The communist regime established after the Second World War made the trauma of Trianon a taboo subject, and it was only mentioned in attempts to make the Hungarians agree with the victors. Following the political transition, the suppressed feelings of national grievance erupted with elemental force. Since 1990, this national tragedy has been regarded in many circles as the source of all of the country's subsequent social and economic tragedies, and attribution of responsibility for the loss of a country that was built up through many centuries of effort has been treated as a key historical and political question. Attempts to find the culprit, however, have tended to underestimate the extent of the Hungarians' own responsibility for the catastrophe. At the same time occasionally emerging, not dominant, voices in public life offend many Hungarians by contending that the Trianon punishment was deserved, and is unworthy of discussion. Mainstream political thinking, however, is in agreement with the most recent scholarly analysis by Ignác Romsics, which concludes that the Treaty of Trianon, and the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty that replaced it, were unjust to the Hungarians. Hungarians are indisputably justified in demanding rights of self-determination for their minority communities in neighbouring countries. To hope for any more is surely an illusion, and to demand any more would be ill-considered.

Voluntary or Forced? Hungary in the Second World War

The assessment of Hungary's political system between 1919 and 1945 and the part it played in the Second World War have been among the most prominent historical themes in the political discourse since the political transition of 1989–90. The Horthy era has also generated questions of continuity and discontinuity. Miklós Horthy, "regent" and head of state between 1920 and 1944, is one of the most controversial figures of modern Hungarian history. For those on the right wing, Horthy's system, despite the lack of democracy, was much more legitimate than the communism imposed on Hungary from outside and may stand as an antecedent of the democratic system created in 1990. Those on left wing regard Horthy and his regime as a dead end and do not want any continuity with it, particularly because of the responsibility it is said to bear for the killing of the majority of Hungarian Jews. They prefer to look on the short "democratic" period between 1945 and 1948 and 1956 as the direct antecedents of today's democracy, although some recent research challenges this assessment concerning the 1945–1948 period.

The most oversimplified, schematic assessments started to be reviewed by Hungarian historians in the 1980s. They assessed the nationalism and irredentism of the Horthy era in comparison with similar phenomena in other small states in the region. Leading historians have given accounts of the authoritarian political system and the broad powers of the regent not as steps towards totalitarianism but as a show of strength against political movements that were infused with extreme right-wing, Fascist and Nazi influences. Few, however, dispute that in pursuing his revisionist aims, the close ties Horthy forged with Germany were not in Hungary's long-term interests.

The Rákosi System and the 1956 Revolution

In 1944, it was agreed that Hungary would be taken as booty by the victorious Soviet empire. For the first time in its history, the country would belong not to the West but to an autocratic Eastern European civilization. Within a few years, exiled communists returning from the Soviet Union in 1945 ruthlessly built up a Stalinist dictatorship under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, "Stalin's best pupil". This process can best be summed up as a war waged by the state against its own citizens masked by an illusion of rapid, all-encompassing modernization. Deprived of its economic independence and

personal freedoms, nearly every section of Hungarian society was kept under permanent police terror. Everything was pervaded by centrally-controlled messianic communist ideology, one aspect of which was a total reinterpretation of the past. The new view of history involved a fixation on Hungary's belonging to Eastern Europe and an interpretation of the previous four hundred years as nothing more than the story of independence struggles against the Ottomans, Habsburgs and the Germans.

On 23 October 1956, the people of Hungary rose up in rare unanimity against the oppressive system. As the leading Western powers remained passive, the Soviet Union brutally suppressed the movement on 4 November. The assessment of the event and what led up to it are still subjects of controversy in Hungary and abroad. We certainly regard it as a turning point in world history, because in the long term it made an irretrievable breach in the wall of the communist world system. In addition to being a reaction against oppression, it was a moral act: a fight to protect human dignity. 1956 was also a fight for Hungary's internal and external self-determination, and Hungarians are still very sensitive to what they see as attempts to restrict the independence that was recovered with such a struggle. Consequently, we do not agree with the views that 1956 was an "uprising", "rebellion" or "counter-revolution". We take the side of those who see the Hungarian people as effecting a "revolution" and a "fight for freedom" in 1956, because they did indeed want to overthrow a system of government together with its social and cultural foundations (major criteria for a revolution as Noman Davies maintains). For Hungarians, the real tragedy of 1956 is not just defeat by the Soviet Union but the still-unrepaired damage done by the Kádár system that was then put in place. It is a great pity that commemoration of 1956 has become divisive over the last thirty years. In summer and autumn 1989, it was the common foundation that prompted action by highly diverse political currents critical of the communist regime. However, since the early 1990s, interpretations of the causes, course and consequences of the 1956 revolution and struggle for freedom have been frequently exploited for political goals to suit the needs of constructing historical legitimacy.

The Kádár System

Although the Kádár system is looked on by many Hungarians as different from the Rákosi system it replaced, the two systems shared the same theoretical principles, long-term objectives and system of government. Their tactics, however, were very different: what his predecessors effected by force and open terror, Kádár, after the initial bloody reprisals, did by bribery and gradually wearing down the real opponents. Over a period of thirty years, the "Goulash Communism" system, which built up living conditions on shaky foundations, guided the traditionally highly nationally-minded Hungarian society towards the acceptance of pragmatic survival strategies and broke up the Hungarian middle class and rural society (by the enforced introduction of the cooperative system). Hungarian society has still not shaken off the consequences of this. His apparent liberalism, so unusual in the communist world, made Kádár a favourite in the West, but was much criticized within the Soviet Bloc.

An assessment of the continuities and discontinuities of the Kádár system (1956–1988) is an essential part of the search for the antecedents of post-communist democratic political systems. The academic and political-social debate on the Kádár era centres around two politically-motivated areas. One involves the social base of the state party: prior to the transition, about twenty per cent of the active working population of Hungary were members of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP). The question is: does this large number reflect coercion and fear of reprisals, the number of "real" communists being no more than 30,000 (the number of members of the Hungarian Communist Party in spring 1945 and of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party at the end of 1956; the successors to the MSZMP, the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Workers' Party had a similar combined number of members at the end of 1989) or – at least during the period of stabilization of the system (from about

1962 to 1980) – not only the steadily-expanding party membership but also a large part of Hungarian society, even if they did not necessarily support it, did not actively oppose the objectives and political methods of the Kádár system. The other question concerns the decline and fall of the system, the "hierarchy" of the four main causes: 1) The fundamental rearrangement of the international political and economic environment; 2) The structural faults and deficiencies in the pillars of the socialist-communist system; 3) The activity of the opposition, the various groups of dissenters; 4) The work of reform communists within the party. Which factor contributed to what extent in the demolition of the monolithic party state? There is not yet a consensus on the answer.

The Power of Continuity and Tradition

Returning again to the main theme of our essay, the continuities and discontinuities in Hungarian history, we present as a closing example the first political debate following the political transition that affected fundamental questions of our history.

After the first free elections in four decades, the National Assembly, which had become the real centre of Hungarian politics, had to deal with questions of historical legitimacy. Some members of our profession who had been elected to parliament or appointed to important political posts made a considerable contribution to this debate. One of the first items on the agenda of the new parliament was a decision on a new coat of arms for the state. This prompted a clash of widely varying viewpoints. Several historians favoured the coat of arms without the crown that was approved in 1849 at the proposal of Lajos Kossuth, because it symbolized change not only in 1849 but also during the subsequent revolutionary upheavals. It was under these armorial bearings that the republic was proclaimed on 16 November 1918, following the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, and the same happened when it was proclaimed again on 1 February 1946 and during the 1956 Revolution. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of parliamentary deputies (228 out of 291) voted for the arms with the royal crown at the top. Their principal argument was that the crown represented the continuity of Hungarian statehood and not royal power.

A similar question that demanded a decision was to set the date of the official state holiday. There were three candidates: 15 March, commemorating 1848, 20 August, recognizing the merits of the founder of the state, Saint Stephen, and 23 October, commemorating the outbreak of the 1956 Revolution. In line with the government's proposal and the decision on the coat of arms, the deputies declared Saint Stephen's work, the creation of the Christian Hungarian state in the year 1000, as the most important event in Hungarian history, and this was made the symbol of the Hungarian state and nation.

Most liberals, socialists and "Young Democrats" chose 15 March, because they considered it to better symbolize modern Hungarian statehood, national unity and democracy. The parliamentary decision, however, did not mean that 15 March and 23 October would not have been recognized as state and national holidays and days of rest. It can be said, therefore, that the understanding of the main course of Hungarian history as perceived by the majority of legislators was right: 15 March and 23 October, despite their emotional and moral significance, are commemorations of what were, at least in the short term, failures. By contrast, 20 August is the symbol of unmatched continuity and unmatched persistence. Few statesmen anywhere in the world can boast what Saint Stephen can: his creation, the state of Hungary, has survived for more than a thousand years.

Pál Fodor – Attila Pók