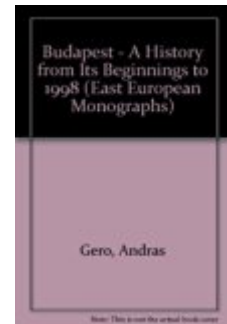


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andras Gero, Janos Poor, eds. *Budapest: A History from Its Beginnings to 1998*. Boulder and New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. vii + 354 pp. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-359-7.

Reviewed by Robert Nemes (Colgate University)  
Published on HABSBURG (December, 1997)



## A New Biography of Budapest

It has been more than two decades since the appearance of the last comprehensive English-language history of Budapest. Edited by Agnes Sagvari, *Budapest: The History of a Capital* contained over sixty pages of historical documents, a detailed chronology, and ninety illustrations. The historical narrative was perhaps its least useful feature, giving short shrift to medieval, cultural, and social history and passing over the Holocaust in two sentences. Indeed, the book showed its true colors by privileging the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and characterizing the 1956 Revolution as a “counter revolution” which had “won the support of politically uneducated and backwards people.”[1]

The present volume provides a useful corrective to such infelicities. Spanning the history of Budapest from the Roman era to the present day, it documents the city’s past in an evenhanded and balanced way. Its approach is encyclopedic and descriptive, with each chapter outlining the demographic, economic, social, political, and cultural developments of a given period. Although not without its drawbacks, this uniform structure ensures that the patient reader will encounter a wealth of information on the history of Budapest.

This comprehensive approach works best in the book’s first chapters, which trace the history of Budapest through 1815. A succession of kings, pashas, and viceroys inhabited Buda’s castles, while merchants and craftsmen long profited from Pest’s markets and commerce. In the chapter on the towns’ early history, Ga-

bor Agoston points out that although settlements in this region went back much further (there had been Roman and then Celtic habitations in this area), by the Middle Ages Buda was still a small town and Pest little more than a village. Prosperity came with the royal court and reached a peak during the reign of King Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490). This golden era was short-lived and came to a close with the Ottoman occupation of the early sixteenth century. A destructive siege in 1686 expelled the Ottomans, but as Janos Poor shows in his chapter on the eighteenth century, the towns recovered only slowly. Eighteenth-century Budapest was provincial and dusty, and as in many towns in the Habsburg Monarchy, German-speakers comprised the largest part of the population—a position they would retain through the mid-nineteenth century.

Officially, of course, there was no “Budapest” before 1873, when the towns of Buda, Pest and Obuda united to form Budapest.[2] Yet as Laszlo Csorba shows in his excellent chapter on the period from 1815 to 1873, the unification of the towns capped decades of economic, administrative and cultural development. The real virtue of Csorba’s approach is to show how this process continued in spite of political absolutism before 1848 and “neo-absolutism” in the 1850s. He also provides a detailed description of the nineteenth-century townscape, drawing our attention to suburbs, parks, villas, and the Chain Bridge. As in other European cities, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the radical transformation of Budapest in its appearance and its

social and economic life. Its population, which had been little more than 60,000 at the turn of the nineteenth century, rose to 300,000 by 1873 and exploded to 880,000 by 1910. As the city grew, it also became more “Hungarian,” which revealed itself not only in the language of administration and education, but also in sermons, newspapers, street signs, and the theater. The chapter on Budapest during the Dual Monarchy is already crammed with information; still, one wishes that the city’s vibrant cultural life (to say nothing of sports, voluntary associations, and department stores) had received more attention.

With the breakup of the Habsburg Monarchy, Budapest became the capital of a small country. It is not difficult to paint the interwar period, as Miklos Lacko does, in rather somber colors. Budapest’s great size, so recently grounds for pride, was now viewed by many observers as a liability: one-sixth of the county’s population lived in greater Budapest. While Lacko largely overlooks the interwar period’s flourishing cultural life and activist municipal governments, he candidly documents poor living conditions and the gradual erosion of local political life in the late 1930s. He also details the promulgation of the anti-Jewish laws, the creation of the Jewish ghetto, and the deportations of 1944. Laszlo Varga’s chapter on post-war Budapest begins in 1945 but devotes the most space to the antecedents and events of the 1956 Revolution. Judit Kosa’s informative but brief chapter on the Kadar era (1957-1988) is more concerned with the city itself and documents the rise of countless multiple-story apartment buildings: “Viewed from the air, the city seemed to have been buried in concrete” (p. 263). As Laszlo Baan notes in his generally upbeat chapter describing contemporary Budapest (1989-1996), the dilapidation of many buildings, and especially these prefabricated concrete buildings, is one of the greatest problems confronting the city today.

In addition to Kosa’s chapter on the Kadar years, there is a special chapter by Janos Rainer on the continued reprisals against the participants in the 1956 revolution. While the story of the “post-revolutionary crisis” is an important one and needs to be told (thousands were sent to internment camps and hundreds were executed), it seems out of place in this book. Kadar’s consolidation of power may have taken place in Budapest, but it was acted out on the stage of national and international politics. Readers interested in the 1956 Revolution should consult Gyorgy Litvan’s recent volume, to which Rainer also contributed.[3]

The inclusion of Rainer’s chapter raises a problem common to the latter part of the book: the relationship

of the city to the state. Given Budapest’s pre-eminence in national affairs, it is tempting to view Hungarian history of the twentieth century merely as the history of Budapest writ large. Conversely, with the national government’s growing intervention in municipal affairs over the course of the twentieth century, the city at times seems to have disappeared into the state. While it is obviously difficult to disentangle the history of a large capital city from the history of a small country, it seems to me that this is a question worth considering. Closer analysis of local and regional planning, of public housing and transportation as well as of economic policy, would highlight similarities between Budapest and other European cities in the twentieth century.

This raises another weakness of the book: the complete absence of a comparative framework. We hear almost nothing of other Hungarian or European towns, and the footnotes make few references to non-Hungarian books or authors. Even passing references to European urban history would give the reader a better sense of what is distinct and what is typical about the history of Budapest. A wider discussion of urban history would also suggest a host of themes and topics not covered in this volume. The relationship between the city and its hinterland, which is central to considerations of the urban economy and society, is largely absent from this history of Budapest. Social conflict in all its forms, from food riots to mass demonstrations, is also missing here. A discussion of popular culture and the patterns of everyday life would add interest to the later chapters. While it is easy for a reviewer to point out errors of omission, it is worth mentioning that these and other interesting topics are often taken up in *BudaPesti negyed* (Budapest Quarterly), a journal appearing since 1993 and edited by Andras Gero, who is also one of the editors of the present volume.

The editors seem to have given little thought to the potential readership for this book. Scholars looking for a cogent case study in urban history may be disappointed by the book’s somewhat dated methodology and the cursory presentation of evidence. Although it touches upon many important aspects of urban life, the book rarely stays on a topic long enough to develop it satisfactorily. The less empirically-minded reader will not have a better time of it. Names, dates, and figures hurtle past, and little attempt has been made to fuse the different sections into a coherent and compelling narrative (the chapters by Poor and Csorba are notable exceptions). A sampling of memoirs, novellas and travelers’ accounts, together with a picture or two, would have made this a

more readable book. In short, there is neither the magic of John Lukacs's wonderful *Budapest 1900* nor the empirical depth and methodological rigor of Gerhard Melinz's and Susan Zimmermann's recent comparison of Vienna, Prague and Budapest.[4] This is disappointing, since this history of Budapest brings together an impressive lineup of Hungarian scholars.

Finally, this volume seems to have found the copyeditors at Atlantic Research asleep at the wheel. Typographical errors abound, and though they are usually harmless and even amusing (as when Kadar and Biszku "smoked off to Moscow" in 1956—page 243), together they diminish the presentation of this material. Perhaps the most inexplicable oversight (or is it just a marketing gimmick?) can be found in the book's title, which promises to cover the history of Budapest through 1998. Since the last chapter only goes up to 1996, it seems that two years were simply tacked on to make the book seem more timely. If so, it is hardly convincing: in spite of its futuristic title, this new history of Budapest—in terms of both its methodology and themes—is firmly rooted in the past.

#### Notes

[1]. Agnes Sagvari, ed., *Budapest: History of a Capital* (Budapest: Corvina, 1975), 69. Tellingly, the book

includes a picture of the massive May Day rally of 1957, symbolizing Janos Kadar's consolidation of power, but none of the Revolution of 1956.

[2]. Francis Joseph signed the law unifying the three towns on December 22, 1872, and this was promulgated the next day as Article 1872/XXXVI. Only on November 17, 1873, however, did the town council of "Buda-Pest" finally assume full administrative powers.

[3]. Gyorgy Litvan, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953-1963* (London and New York: Longman, 1996).

[4]. John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988); Gerhard Melinz and Susan Zimmermann, eds., *Wien-Prag-Budapest: Blutezeit der Habsburgmetropolen; Urbanisierung, Kommunalpolitik, gesellschaftliche Konflikte (1867-1918)* (Wien: Promedia, 1996), reviewed by the present reviewer on HABS-BURG, <http://h-net2.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=19881864332388>.

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**Citation:** Robert Nemes. Review of Gero, Andras; Poor, Janos, eds., *Budapest: A History from Its Beginnings to 1998*. HABS-BURG, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

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