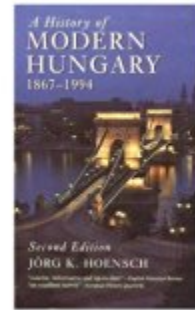


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joerg K. Hoensch. *A History of Modern Hungary: 1867-1994*. New York and London: Longman, 1995. xviii + 389 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-25649-1.

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## A History of Hungary by Hoensch

The author's objective is ambitious: a comprehensive survey of the history of modern Hungary, focusing attention not only on political events but on the most important trends of economic and social history as well. And all this must be related in a "factually accurate, informative" style, "free of ideological or apologetic tendencies" (p. xiv). It is a difficult objective, made more so because cultural history had to be left out because of lack of space. Although we have many comprehensive monographs at our disposal (but fewer in foreign languages than would be desirable), Hungarian historiography has tended to concentrate on politics, and monographs on modern social and economic history are scarce even in Hungarian. Moreover, the political changes after 1989 have swept away the former ideological bounds imposed on historiography, especially regarding the history of the twentieth century, and they have often been succeeded only by uncertainty. At the same time Hungarian public opinion and historiography must face new ideological challenges, for certain political forces, in contrast to the former socialist political system, strive to find antecedents and legitimation in the period before 1945. The history of the period after 1945, and especially after 1989, still awaits definitive interpretation. Hoensch's work is really a unique venture in this respect. For a Hungarian reader, the most interesting parts of the book are those dealing with the last seven years. The author's sound information and timeliness are really astonishing.

Because of the comprehensive character of this work, the reviewer must define the boundaries of her competence: I feel qualified to make some general remarks on

the outlook and the structure of the work, and to investigate the two chapters on nineteenth-century history more profoundly.

Hoensch has adapted the tradition of Hungarian historiography according to which—disregarding the "insignificant" fact that Hungary was part of a large empire for centuries—the country's past constitutes a "closed" national history, and all the "external" forces form at most the scenery for a process controlled by internal factors and necessities. Hoensch accepts this narrow interpretation of national history, and therefore he is not able to point out the wider framework and international paradigms that had considerable effect on modern Hungary in addition to the national factors.

Regarding nineteenth-century Hungarian history, one must consider the historical challenges that the old dynastic empire had to face, as well as the political concepts and forces which strove to exert influence upon the development of the empire. Among these forces the Hungarian liberal political movement was one of the most effective: it managed, at the cost of compromises, to enforce its concepts and interests. The aspirations and interests of the other forces, however, and the conflicts between them, confined the scope of choices for the Hungarian politicians as well.

In the interwar period the histories of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (except for Czechoslovakia) show important congruences. The economic and political expansion of Germany in the 1930s and antiliberal, authoritarian, even dictatorial, political systems are typ-

ical phenomena in this region at that time.

Between 1945 and 1989 the existence of the camp of the so-called People's Democracies (then Socialist countries) restricted the field of independent or self-contained historical development. Only by depicting the common, typical features can the really unique national features be revealed. Ferenc Fejto's book, *A History of the People's Democracies*, gives us a very good and stimulating example.[1]

A historian whose education was not infiltrated by "natural" national biases or, if you will, indoctrinated traditions, has a good chance to put the history of another nation in perspective. As the objectivity of his work shows, Hoensch has been able to make use of the outsider's position, but he has missed the advantages of such a possible broader perspective.

Nor does the structure of the book help the reader get a better view of the main problems and processes. The author correctly combines chronological and thematic points of view, but in different chapters he follows different organizational principles. In the second chapter, "Hungary under the Dual Monarchy, 1867-1918," he begins his survey with thematic units: political parties, Hungarian nationalism and nationality policy, social stratification and economic development, religion, education, and culture. Then three seemingly chronological sections follow: about the period of Count Andrássy's and Kalman Tisza's prime ministerships, the crisis of Dualism, and the period of the First World War. Hoensch examines here the organization of the state, the so-called common affairs and follows that with a chronological outline of the political events of the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, and further thematic summaries of the labor movement and of nationalities policy (again) and foreign policy. Hoensch ends this chapter with a chronological outline of the events of the First World War. The third chapter, "Hungary between the Wars," is essentially based on chronological narrative; we find only small thematic segments on the economy, on the effects of the world economic crisis (the only topic indicated by a separate section title), and on cultural trends (but only very superficially—pp. 122-24). The reader misses the continuation of the systematic survey on economic and social history presented in the previous chapter. The dominance of the chronological aspect and the lack of social history characterize the last chapters as well.

The terminology used by Hoensch and the translator, Kim Traynor, is accurate in almost every case. Hoensch

uses, however, the word "feudal" in a sense that is both too broad and vague. He speaks of the "feudal legacy" of the Hungarian nobility in the last decades of the nineteenth century (pp. 25, 49); he characterizes the Horthy Era as "feudal," "quasi-feudal," and "semi-feudal" (pp. 115, 145, 148); moreover, in his opinion "the Muscovites" were bound to Stalin by "ties of personal loyalty, almost a feudal relationship" (p. 191). If Hoensch thinks this term is appropriate to describe so many different historical situations, he should have given a definition of the term and not left the reader in the dark. The translator (or Hoensch?) translates specialized terminology very accurately. Nonetheless there is difficulty with the terms "urbanus" and "nepies." The phrases used for the latter, "populist movement" and "nationalist intellectuals" (pp. 268, 285), have a negative connotation rather than being mere descriptive terms. Sometimes Hoensch uses terms that are "anachronistic" or rather too modern—for example, "bourgeois democracy" (p. 5) regarding the political objectives of the liberal reform movement in the Reform Era.

In addition to these general remarks, I would like to call attention to aspects of nineteenth-century Hungarian history that the book does not make sufficiently clear. Three main questions constituted the most important problems for the Hungarian political elite from the beginning of the 1830s until the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire: economic and social modernization, nationalism, and the programme of the nation-state.

Hungarian liberals considered France the ideal of a culturally homogeneous, politically sovereign nation-state. Nevertheless, they realized that Hungary's conditions made it impossible to follow the French pattern entirely. They deemed the existence of the Habsburg Empire a source of support for the weak and underdeveloped Hungarian nation living between East and West (as Hoensch points out briefly while considering the foreign policy in the Dualist Era, p. 55), since they feared the power of ambitious, absolutist Russia on the one hand and the amalgamating cultural influence of the German people on the other. Herder's prophecy echoed and re-echoed throughout the Hungarian political elite, according to which the Hungarian people, standing without relatives in this part of Europe, would dissolve in the ocean of surrounding Slavonic and German peoples. Behind the intolerance of emerging Hungarian nationalism lurked anxiety for national survival. Accepting the existence of the Habsburg Monarchy, they strove for as many elements of state sovereignty as possible within the framework of the Empire. Thus the liberal newspaper *Pesti*

*Hirlap* did not argue for Hungary's complete independence from the Habsburg Monarchy (as Hoensch states—p. 4). The Declaration of Independence proclaimed on 14 April 1849 was the product of a unique civil war situation and it represents rather a side track than the main path in nineteenth-century Hungarian history.

In order to evaluate the historical merits and disadvantages of the Compromise (1867) we must consider the rival programmes for restructuring the Empire, too. The state organization enacted by the Compromise entirely stiffened during the decades of Dualism, preventing any federalist attempt while it offered a large scope for centralization within the two basic units. The principles of the Compromise really ruled out the possibility of accepting any form of a federation based on ethnic-linguistic units. Nevertheless, it could have been compatible with elements of the federalist programmes based on historical provinces, as the Croat-Hungarian “Mini-Compromise” in 1868 or the attempt at Czech-Austrian Compromise in 1871 show. It was the Hungarian political elite that aborted the latter. It is not true that the Compromise of 1867 made the collapse of the Empire inevitable and final, for it could have given scope for further changes that would have enforced rather than weakened the inner political stability of the Empire, thus ensuring the preconditions of great-power status. It is not at all correct that Gyula Miskolczy was right that the Compromise was the only possible solution by which the Empire could preserve its great-power status (p. 19)[2]; Hoensch does not clearly take sides, but he cites Miskolczy's opinion).

Hoensch explains the breakup of the Monarchy as follows: “...the break-up of the Monarchy resulted primarily from the failure to act in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres, together with an unwillingness to implement long overdue democratic social reforms and allow the unrestricted development of its nationalities” (p. 83). This statement, however, can be applied only for Hungary but not for the whole Monarchy, since the development of Austria with respect to social and political modernization as well as national minorities' rights was essentially different from the Hungarian pattern. The failure to consider the imperial framework also makes it impossible to take a wider, overall view of this decisive change in Hungarian history. Among the different factors it must be mentioned that the generous territorial promises made by the Entente to Italy and Romania in 1915-16 fostered the disintegration of the Monarchy and stimulated the emigre national movements to see its breakup as their objective. Even so, only

in 1918 did the Great Powers decide on the dismemberment of the Monarchy.

The reader misses consideration of the imperial framework in the sections on nationalism, too. Hoensch presents the main objectives of Hungarian nationalism as stimulated by the West European nation-state programme, as well as its consequences in this multinational country. In some cases, however, his statements are not quite correct. The national movements of the non-Hungarian ethnic groups confined their programmes to the linguistic-cultural sphere only in the 1840s. In 1848-49 they demanded not only cultural autonomy (as Hoensch affirms on p. 7), but administrative-political autonomy as well. Moreover, due to the growing strength of the different Slavic national movements on the imperial political stage, they all established a goal of secession from Hungary and of becoming separate provinces of the Empire. The federalist programmes at the turn of century (Aurel Popovici, the South Slav trialist programme) only continue this tradition. Taking this fact into consideration, it becomes much more comprehensible why the Hungarian political elite was so categorically averse to the concept of administrative-political autonomy for the national minorities.

Hoensch is not completely accurate regarding the Hungarian Diet of 1861, either (p. 14). It is true that the Hungarians refused the programme of administrative autonomy, but they realized the importance of a possible agreement with the other national movements, and they took certain steps in order to achieve this. They offered the most important elements of cultural autonomy and the unrestricted use of the mother tongue for individuals in the public sphere. The disagreement about administrative autonomy did not rule out the common struggle to restore the “'48 platform” against the Court; a commission was elected to outline a bill ensuring the use of native languages in administration, education, and so forth; the disagreement between the national movements was rather a pretext than a reason for dissolving the Diet.

Hoensch thoroughly and objectively presents the policy of the Hungarian political elite toward the non-Hungarian groups in the Dualist period. He seems, however, to overestimate the role of “the government's repressive measures against the country's minorities” (p. 35) or this kind of “harrassment” (p. 75) in the large-scale emigration at the end of the century. In his opinion, the treatment of national minorities in Hungary before the First World War can be described as “relatively liberal and tolerable compared with contemporary conditions”

(p. 35); nevertheless, while he presents the restricting endeavours and orders, he does not show the possibilities (banks representing national interests, cultural associations, parties organised on national principles) that made the movements of the national minorities far from negligible political factors.

In the paragraphs on social stratification and economic development in the Dualist era, Hoensch precisely summarizes the main problems and trends in this field. He seems, however, to be too severe concerning the historical role of the Hungarian nobility. He again and again refers to its “feudal legacy,” its so-called stubborn defence of its “traditional prerogatives” (p. 49). He states that the Twelve Point Programme of 15 March 1848 “went beyond the nobility’s reform policies” (p. 6). In reality, the programme of the Oppositional Declaration (1847) setting up the main objects of the liberal nobility (not even mentioned by Hoensch) and the Twelve Points entirely harmonize with each other.

The author does not deal with economic and social processes before 1867. He mentions the “disillusioned peasants” and the “growing dissatisfaction” of the peasantry in 1848-49 (pp. 7-9), but he does not explain the exact reason for their “disillusionment.” He does not deal with the Peasant Patent (1853) or with its consequences, so the historical roots of the peasant problem and the so-called “gentry” problem after 1867 remain unknown for the reader.

Despite the faults outlined here, the book fulfills its mission: it generally provides accurate information on almost the entire spectrum of modern Hungarian history. What is more, it does it in a balanced way, free of ideological or other antipathies or sympathies. However, it is used better as a handbook for dates, names, and other facts, than as an exciting work that arouses the reader’s interest, prompts contemplation, or inspires comparisons. The author overwhelms the reader with facts, dates, and names that seem in some cases even for a Hungarian reader too much; and the historical processes that could arrange the mass of facts and determine their local value are not outlined as accurately as the facts. Despite the promise made in the preface, the work concentrates first of all on politics, and the sections on economics and society are supplementary.

#### Notes

[1]. Francois Fejto, *A History of the People’s Democracies: Eastern Europe since Stalin* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

[2]. Gyula Miskolczy, *Ungarn in der Habsburger-Monarchie*, Wiener historische Studien, Bd. 5 (Wien: Herold, 1959).

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