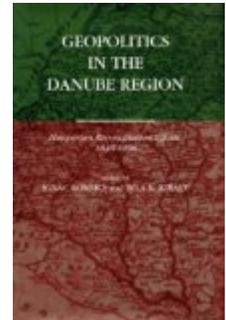




Ignac Romsics, Bela K. Kiraly, eds.. *Geopolitics in the Danube Region: Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts, 1848-1998*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999. 378 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-963-9116-29-0.



Reviewed by Peter I. Hidas

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In the year 2000 Hungary celebrates the first millennium of the Hungarian state. For the first 800 years threats usually came from without but from the beginning of the nineteenth century they came from within: at least until 1918 when the minorities, along with three million Hungarians, were separated from Hungary proper. From the early 1800s on, Hungarian politicians, publicists and historians, regardless of their political hue, searched for a formula for peace and reconciliation in the central Danubian region.

In late 1996 when the socialists, whose policy was reconciliation with Hungary's neighbours, were still in power in Hungary, one of the editors of the work under review was asked to publish a book on the same topic. The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs undertook to subsidize the volume. Bela Kiraly invited Peter Pasztor and later Ignac Romsics to assist him in the editing of a collection of essays. An English teacher from Hungary who currently lives in the US, Nora Arato, was put in charge of the translation. Its quality is uneven. There are some stylistically elegant presentations in the volume (the articles by Romsics

and Reiner), while some are disturbingly ungrammatical. One of the authors informed me that he would have done a much better job at translation if he had been aware of the problem the editors had. Thus, it would appear that some authors did their own translations or wrote their contributions in English.

Professor Kiraly states in his Preface that he decided to take responsibility "for ensuring the comprehensiveness, cohesion, internal balance, and scholarly quality of the series we have launched" but to print them "without major modification" and, I may add, without minor ones as well. What saves the collections is the participation of some of the best Hungarian historians. There was an early sign that the publication was in trouble: Professor Peter Pasztor resigned from his co-editorship and the American academic members of the Board of Directors resigned en bloc from Atlantic Research and Publications. Professor Kiraly moved ARP to Budapest. In the place of Columbia University Press, CEU Press (Budapest) took charge of the book. Meanwhile, a new right-of-centre government came to power with

little sympathy for Soros's CEU Press but with great interest in the nationality question within the Carpathian basin. The Orban government turned ARP into a public foundation (Atlanti Kutato es Kiado Alapitvany). *Geopolitics in the Danube Region* was ready for launching in 1998.

Two post-Communist Hungarian governments supported the publication because most of the essays attempt to demonstrate the "progressive" nature of Hungarian thinkers past and present. Unfortunately the ruling circles and the prominent intellectuals always emphasized the leading role of the Magyars in the Carpathian basin. The figures discussed in this volume had little impact on the Hungarian public in general. Since no non-Hungarian is given a chance to comment on "Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts," the reader will learn more about Hungarian intellectual history than about "Geopolitics in the Danube Region." The volume includes useful short biographies of key personalities, a basic bibliography, three maps, a name and a geographical index.

Ignac Romsics provides the reader with a panoramic introduction on the nationality question and geopolitics. He outlines the impact of Russia and Germany on the problem, but his ideas are not followed up in the volume except by the brilliantly written (in 1955!) brief study by the late Peter Hanak (pp. 306-312). Hanak's paper could have served the volume well either as a second introduction or as a conclusion. Hanak answers his own question, "Why did the Danubian Federation Plans Fail?," with an apt remark: federative ideology was a compensation for defeat and not an idea for the victors. The plans were the utopias of powerless leaders. By 1918 all such ideas were forgotten. All proposals for a Danubian federation failed because of the absence of suitable economic and social conditions, and because the issues of minority autonomy remained unsolved. Hanak's vision of a European union was a vision of the twenty-first century.

Agnes Deak wrote the volume's first major study. Unfortunately, it is marred by poor translation, undefined Marxist terminology, and a weak structure. The study concerns a proposal by Miklos Wesselenyi in the 1840s to divide the Habsburg Empire into five parts: Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, Hungary, Lombardy and Austro-Germany. Wesselenyi thought that peaceful coexistence could be achieved within Hungary along with the imposition of the Hungarian language on the Slavs.

Andras Gergely describes the pre-1848 Magyar liberal nationality policy in his "The Hungarian Nationalities Act of 1849." He writes that only the French type of state appealed to the Hungarian liberals. While the nationalities demanded territorial autonomy, the liberals wanted them to assimilate, and as a last resort offered them cultural autonomy in the dying days of the revolution. They did it out of political necessity and for history and not, as many historians believe, for the purpose of foreign propaganda and appeasement. The editors left a few quirky statements in this otherwise excellent study: "Hungarian historiography records" (p. 41) and "In general prior to 1848 legislation existed only in Western Europe." (p. 42)

The section entitled "Crossroads between Revolution and the Compromise (1848-1867)" contains studies by Gyorgy Szabad and Ambrus Miskolczy. Szabad describes Kossuth's ideas on confederation, that did not include the nationalities living within the Kingdom of Hungary. Kossuth rejected Laszlo Teleki's proposal to form a confederation within the country and offer collective rights to the minorities. In 1862 Kossuth proposed a Danubian Confederation of Serbia, Hungary, Romania and Transylvania, but by then who was listening to Kossuth? Miskolczy also confirms the ineffectiveness of the emigre politicians.

Laszlo Katus shows how the Hungarian liberals, Jozsef Eotvos, Ferenc Deak and their followers, took the road of compromise not only with

the Habsburg family but with the minorities as well. From 1860 on they proposed the decentralization of the state. The liberal programme provided for municipal and county (possibly territorial) autonomy and free use of local languages in public life and education. In short, they offered a multi-ethnic state to the nationalities. Eotvos and Deak searched for a solution within the Habsburg Empire while rejecting the melting-pot idea or Magyarization. Their ideas were put into practice soon after the Compromise, but were abandoned from 1875 on at the insistence of the nationalist Hungarian ruling elite.

Gyorgy Gyarmati's study concerns the Inter-War period. Gyarmati admits that Hungarian progressives and intellectuals "did not greatly influence contemporary thinking" since the majority of the population and the political thinkers were revisionists."(p. 204). Gyorgy Litvan in effect says the same about Oszkar Jaszi, who despite his "great understanding of the nationalities" (p. 229) and his struggle for social justice rejected the internal federation of Hungary. Only the political scientist Istvan Bibo was able to shake off the nationalist approach to the reconciliation of the peoples of the Danubian basin. Tibor Lukacs relates Bibo's criticism of Hungarian public opinion for exaggerated self-esteem and unreasonable reactions towards the world at large. Bibo wrote that the only solution to the nationality question is the establishment of democracies in the region, which in time will lead to a political equilibrium. Lukacs rejects Bibo's thesis and criticizes him for not analyzing Great Power politics.

Towards the end of the volume there are three papers on international relations. Two of them are descriptions of laws, and only one, by Janos M. Rainer, is an analytical discussion. It is entitled "National Independence, Neutrality, and Cooperation in the Danube Region: Imre Nagy's Foreign Policy Ideas." However, it is difficult to speak about a foreign policy of Imre Nagy. He became prime minister in 1953, but only followed

the Soviet foreign policy party line at that time; when he became premier again during the revolution of 1956 he had no time to conduct foreign policy since the revolution lasted less than two weeks. Nagy's ideas never progressed beyond the ideology of a national communist.

All in all, due to the work of many distinguished Hungarian historians and despite the lack of good editing and proofreading, this book provides useful reading for specialists and the well-informed public. The presence of non-Hungarian authors and some discussion on the impact of Hungarian membership in NATO and adherence to the European Union would have enhanced the presentation.

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