

# Political Uses of Historical Comparisons: Medieval and Modern Hungary

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I believe there has been plenty of discussion about the uses and abuses of history in general. The claims to a piece of land, based on “historical rights” — from Alsace through Palestine to Kosovo — triggered some of the bloodiest conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What I propose to sketch here is small selection of political uses — for very different reasons but essentially to bolster historical myths of origin and priority or its opposites — of the writing of history in Hungary, from the Middle Ages to our own times, with somewhat less bloody, but still live and dangerous implications.<sup>1</sup> The following examples, while taken from the historiography of only one country, might be of interest beyond its borders. It seems that other nations — mainly smaller ones or others having suffered similar fates — applied historical comparison for rather similar purposes.<sup>2</sup>

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1 On the historiography of the region, see Kłoczowski, *L'Europe du centre-est dans l'historiographie des pays de la région*. On the “uses and abuses” of history in eastern and east-central Europe, see, *inter alia*, Bock and Wolfrum, eds., *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit*.

2 It is interesting that in the major states of western Europe, the opposite was usually the case: they were not interested in comparisons. In *England and its Rulers 1066-1272*, Michael Clanchy writes, “The common interests and problems of thirteenth-century rulers have tended to be ignored because medieval political history has often been written with a nationalist bias. [. . .] Consequently, instead of examining the similarities between medieval rulers, historians of each nation picked out individual traits in their own kings which they thought revealed incipient national character” (214). Even as famous a historian as F. M. Powicke, in the *Oxford History of England*, asked such a rhetorical question: “How was it that in England alone, among the monarchies of the west, the right of the king to select his own advisers became a subject of such bitter controversy?” (qtd. in Clanchy, *England and its Rulers*, 214) — as if this phenomenon had not been typical for all kingdoms of that time!

I intend to look at two cases from the Middle Ages and one from the age of the Reformation and at their “uses” during the last centuries. It is, of course, problematic whether one should include in the notion of “historical comparison” all those medieval authors who tried to connect their nation’s (or region’s) history with the history of humankind, that is, biblical or classical history. However, some of these “comparisons” remained (or became) politically relevant later.

The anonymous author of one of the *Gesta Hungarorum* of c.1200 (who identified himself as Master P., “former notary of King Béla”)<sup>3</sup> had two major concerns: to present an elegant genealogy for the ruling dynasty (which had just established a marriage contact with the Capetians) and appropriate pedigrees for the clans of the great men of the realm of his age. To do this, he placed the ancestors of the Magyars in a mythical past which referred to both the Bible and to classical authors. Historians of his time, to be sure, commonly claimed Trojan or Roman origin for their dynasties or peoples. According to the Anonymus (as he is usually referred to), the Magyars came from Scythia, where their first ruler was Magog, son of Japhet — “et gens illa a Magog rege est vocatus Moger.”<sup>4</sup> So far the etymology. However, the “fact” that the Scythians — implicitly forebears of the Hungarians — were a most wise and gentle (*sapientissima et mansueta*) people and great warriors came to be a core element of the political rhetoric of the nobility in the early sixteenth century. While aimed at “foreign kings” (such as the Polish Jagiello dynasty of their times and, even more, at the threatening new power, the Habsburgs), the rhetoric also served to underpin the claims of a great number of nobles to martial virtues and hence to freedom from taxation.

The Anonymus supplied even more significant political ammunition, however, many centuries after his own lifetime. When the text was first printed in 1746 and then translated into Hungarian in 1799, it came just in time for the Romantic national revival. Soon epics were written about the victory of the conquering Magyars of the ninth century over their Slavic enemies — in a country in which at that time the majority of the citizens were Slavs or Romanians.

The Anonymus also described an oath sworn by the chieftains of the Magyars and sealed “in the pagan way” (*more paganorum*) — by mixing their blood in a cup and drinking it up in a round. According to the *Gesta*, the chiefs agreed always to elect a leader from the tribe of Álmos, who, in turn, would never leave their offspring out of

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3 The most recent edition (with German translation) is by Silagi and Veszprémy, *Die “Gesta Hungarorum” des anonymen Notars*.

4 *Gesta*, chap. 1, line 27.

his council — if any of them did, the future magnates had the right to resist him. Eventually, this “blood-contract” came to be the basis for Hungary’s “thousand year old constitution.” In 1904, Count Albert Apponyi told the assembled members of the parliaments of many countries in St. Louis, Missouri, that “the Hungarian constitution is as old as the Hungarian people [. . .] and proved to be better than all others in supporting the monarchy without diminishing the liberty of the subjects.”<sup>5</sup> For home consumption, this had already been stated twenty years earlier by Count Gyula Andrásy, Jr., who wrote in a family journal that “The free constitution of Hungary is the oldest among all peoples on the continent.”<sup>6</sup> The main issue at that time was the claim to a privileged position for the Hungarian kingdom within the multinational Habsburg Monarchy, in particular vis-à-vis the nationalities within the borders of Hungary.

The text of the Anonymus — augmented by the vivid imagination of the great romancier Maurus Jókai — was also the basic “script” for a national cyclorama *The Arrival of the Magyars*, painted for the Hungarian Millennium celebrated in 1896. This series of pictures — on a canvas fifteen metres high and 120 metres long, placed in a circle some forty metres across — depicts the victorious Magyar chieftains, the defeated Slavic leaders, the entry of the Magyar queen, the death of the Slavic priest, and the sacrifice of a white horse by the Magyars. As was usually the case in these kinds of shows (once called “the movies before the movie”), the artists were anxious to be as accurate as possible. The precision of the detail concerning items such as dress and equipment served to guarantee the purported authenticity of the message. The location, the Verecke Pass in the Carpathian Mountains, was selected on the basis of the medieval chronicler’s description, while the depiction of the conquering Magyars, nomadic mounted warriors of the steppes, drew upon the museums of several countries. The message was nicely spelled out (again, as usual with panoramas) in the accompanying booklet. In one of the major scenes, one could see the victorious horsemen riding over the dead bodies of the defeated natives. “They die, where they lived. It was their homeland, but a homeland without constitution, like the forest for the bear or the field for the mole.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the ancestors of the slight majority of the citizens of the “thousand years old” state were like moles — while the 48% or so of the population who were of Magyar descent

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5 Apponyi, “Speech at the Meeting of the Interparliamentary Union.”

6 *Vasárnapi Újság* (Sunday News), 15 June 1884, quoted in Bak and Gara-Bak, “The Ideology of a ‘Millennial Constitution’ in Hungary,” 307.

7 On this Panorama, see Bak and Gara-Bak, “The Ideology of a ‘Millennial Constitution’ in Hungary,” 314-26, incl. images pp. 324-26; and my “Die Mediävisierung der Politik im Ungarn des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.”

could claim valiant riders as their forefathers. And this was “authenticated” by the words of the poor anonymous notary of 700 years before.

Another medieval author, Simon of Kéza, chaplain of King Ladislas IV, wrote his *Gesta* around 1282-1283.<sup>8</sup> He gave Magor a brother by the name of Hunor and thus “established” the Hun-Hungarian continuity, allowing the Magyars to base their claim to hereditary property on the conquests of Attila and the *Landnahme* (“taking the land”) of the ninth century. He also described the ancient equality of these Hun-Hungarians, “before they became Christians.” At that time, according to Simon, the entire population was called up to arms, and those who did not appear at the given time and place were subject to either death or perpetual servitude.<sup>9</sup> That is the reason, he explains, why some Hungarians are free and others are serfs — even though they are all descendants of the eponymous heroes of the Scythian past. This text was incorporated almost *verbatim* into the law-book of the lawyer-politician Stephen Werbőczy, printed in 1517 and re-edited since then thirty-two times. It became virtually the legal Bible of the noble commonwealth until the very end of the *ancien régime*, justifying the noble status of some and the servile status of many.<sup>10</sup>

In the sixteenth to seventeenth century, another peculiar “comparison” emerged. In the country torn by Ottoman occupation, continuous wars, and the persecution of Protestants by the Habsburg-sponsored Counter-Reformation, the nation’s fate was compared to that of the biblical Israel. In 1538, the Calvinist minister András Farkas wrote a rhymed chronicle with the title *Cronica de introductione Scytarum in Ungariam et Judaeorum de Aegypto*.<sup>11</sup> Starting out from the, by then “established,” Scythian origin of his people, the author finds several parallels between biblical and Hungarian history. As the Israelites were led by God to the Canaan of milk and honey, so were the Magyars guided into the fertile Danube Basin; as long as good and God-fearing kings ruled the nations, the Magyars flourished, but when evil and idolatrous rulers came to power, the Magyars were justly smitten by misfortune: decline, exile, and the destruction of the temple (in Hungary, the monasteries) at the hands of foreign armies — the Persians there, the Turks here. Only a return to the true faith (that is, Protestant Christianity) could bring back the good times and the happiness of the people. It is only logical, then, that

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8 Simon of Kéza, *The Deeds of the Hungarians/Gesta Hungarorum*, esp. 28-31.

9 Simon of Kéza, *The Deeds of the Hungarians/Gesta Hungarorum*, chaps. 3-7.

10 Werbőczy, *The Customary Law of the Renowned Kingdom of Hungary*, Pars I, Tit. 3.

11 Preserved in a nineteenth-century manuscript copy: Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, sign. Történl. 4rét, 38[(Q) vol.], fols. 55-60, cited by Murdock, “Magyar Judah,” 265-66.

the leader of a Hungarian uprising against the Catholic Habsburgs, Prince Bocskay, was duly called the “Moses of the Hungarians.”<sup>12</sup> Almost a century later, Reformed preachers compared the situation of their people with that of Judah before the Babylonian captivity and called upon the “Magyar Judah” to mend their ways in order to avoid the fate of the Judah of old.<sup>13</sup> However, this kind of religio-ethical comparison did not find real resonance — in contrast, for example, to the situation in Poland, where the nation’s sufferings were equated with that of Jesus and the country seen as “the Christ of the nations.”

In the late nineteenth century, these comparisons reached the scholarly sphere as well. Books were written about the parallels between the Magna Carta and the Golden Bull of King Andrew II (1222)<sup>14</sup> and on the similarity of the assumed responsibility of royal counsellors in Aragon and Hungary.<sup>15</sup> The aim was to prove that the Hungarian state was at least as “advanced” as western European kingdoms and, again, that Magyars were far more a *staatstragende Nation* (the key ethnic group supporting and defining the state) than any of the neighbouring peoples. It was but an elaborate re-statement of the claim made by the seventeenth-century politician and writer Nicholas Zrínyi (Zrinski): “We are not inferior to any other nation!”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, more or less at the same time, historical comparisons which supported opposing views appeared in the writings of the progressive critics of the country’s conditions. Sociologists and political scientists belonging to the first generations of these new disciplines, such as Oscar Jászi and the Socialist Ervin Szabó, used historical comparisons to point to the backwardness of the Hungary of the *latifundia* (great estates in mortmain) and gentry politics (“feudalism”) in contrast to the modern societies of western Europe.<sup>17</sup> The oppression of the national “minorities” (as mentioned above, in fact, the oppression of the majority of the population) was a central part of their argument and was regarded as a basic hindrance to democratic progress. In the 1950s the political thinker István Bibó, himself a champion of social critique based on comparative history, wrote of “the distorted Magyar character and the cul-de-sac of

12 Murdock, “Magyar Judah,” 270.

13 Murdock, “Magyar Judah,” 272-73.

14 For example, Hantos, *The Magna Carta of the English and of the Hungarian Constitution*.

15 Schvarcz, *A király tanácsosainak felelőssége Aragóniában és Magyarországon* (Responsibility of royal counsellors in Aragon and Hungary).

16 “. . . egy nemzetnél sem vagyunk alábbvalóak!” Zrínyi, “Ne bánts a magyart. A török áfium ellen való orvosság . . .” (Hands off Hungary! Medicine against the Turkish opiate . . .), in *Zrínyi Miklós hadtudományi munkái* (Military Writings of Nicholas Zrínyi), 384.

17 On them and their ideas, see Horváth, *Die Jahrhundertwende in Ungarn*.

Hungarian development.”<sup>18</sup> Characteristically, such writers — and most of the later left-wing analysts — compared Hungary to countries like France or Scandinavia rather than trying to locate it in its east-central European context. This shortcoming was characteristic of the Marxist comparatists as well. Having taken Marx’s analysis of development as their point of departure, they could not help describing the Hungarian one as a “deviation” from the canonized pattern (familiar to Marx) of western Europe. This kind of comparison led to rather contradictory conclusions, mainly about the form of the social transformation in eastern and east-central Europe. And it had, indeed, serious consequences for the fate of people like Nikolai Bukharin or Imre Nagy and many others.<sup>19</sup> But this is a subject for a much wider discussion than I can offer here.

An alternative comparison, with full attention to the region between the Baltic and the Adriatic Sea, including Hungary, was offered at the end of the twentieth century. The most influential historical comparison was the essay of the historian Jenő Szűcs, originally written for a samizdat festschrift for the then “outlawed” István Bibó. In “The Three Historical Regions of Europe,” Szűcs argued that Hungary (together with Poland and Bohemia) were incorporated into post-Carolingian Europe in the first centuries of the second millennium but that this transformation remained incomplete by the time when the western part of the continent turned away from its eastern borderlands. This eastern area remained a “third region,” not having followed the Byzantine-Russian pattern of autocracy but also failing to develop along the road of western and west-central Europe. The belated and fragmentary growth of civic society and democratic institutions as well as the mentalities of its people caused its backwardness but kept it still connected to its western neighbours. Implicitly — as far as that was possible under informal censorship — Szűcs wanted to prove that it is unnatural to swallow up this “third” (in-between) region into the Soviet-Byzantine orbit instead of allowing it to catch up with the western democracies, some of whose basic elements it had acquired.

In the world outside scholarship, a few decades ago Hungarian students called for a demonstration in solidarity with the successful replacement of Stalinists in the leadership of the Polish Communist Party. Hungarian-Polish sympathies had a long history from the Middle Ages, when several Polish kings wore the crown of St. Stephen, to the nineteenth century, when the Polish uprisings against Russia were greatly admired and

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18 Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination*.

19 Nikolai I. Bukharin (1888-1938), the Russian Bolshevik, advocated, on the basis of the particular historical development of Russia, a longer “transition period” towards socialism, especially in the countryside; he lost out in arguments against Stalin and was executed after a show trial. Imre Nagy (1896-1958), a Hungarian Communist, agreed in many respects with Bukharin; he was murdered after a secret trial for his role as the prime minister during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.

supported. Then, in 1849, when revolutionary Hungarian Honvéd troops faced the armies of the Habsburg-Romanov alliance, it was General Jozef Bem, a hero of the 1831 Polish rising, who took over the command of the Hungarian forces in Transylvania. Thus, on 23 October 1956, the students called for a march to the statue of the famous general. The historical comparison was obvious; thus the slogan ran, “Poland is showing the way — Let us follow our own way!” The events of 1848 loomed large in the days preceding what became the first anti-totalitarian revolution: the “points” formulated at the Technical University of Budapest and elsewhere were very similar to the famous Twelve Points of 15 March 1848. Among these points figured the restoration of the coat of arms “of Kossuth,” representing the ’48er republican tradition, and the restoration of two national holidays, one on 15 March and the other, on 6 October, for the commemoration of the execution of the revolutionary prime minister and thirteen Honvéd generals in 1849.<sup>20</sup> Within a few hours, the historical “comparison” became a sad reality: after the first exchanges of gunshots, “Russian” (Soviet) troops appeared on the streets of Budapest to crush the armed uprising. On 25 October, a young freedom fighter, asked by a journalist why he was standing on a barricade with arms in hand, replied, “In 1848-49, our ancestors took up arms to resist the intervention against the revolution — how could we not be as courageous as they were when a foreign power is attacking our country?” But finally, just as the army of Prince Paskevich did in 1849, the troops of General Zhukov in November 1956 forced the revolutionaries to give up further resistance.<sup>21</sup>

Fifty years later the historical comparison took a much less serious turn: the title page of the on-board journal of the Hungarian airlines (*Horizon*, December 2006) reads thus: “Everyone stayed here longer than planned: the Romans 400 years, the Ottomans 150, the Soviets 45 — why don’t you stay another night in Budapest?” Why not, indeed?

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20 Bak, “Forward into the Past.”

21 A grotesque “comparison” emerged on the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution. As could be seen on every television screen, a number of dissatisfied people, together with some rowdies ready for disturbance on any occasion, tried to “play 1956” in the streets of Budapest in 2006. One of them even managed to get an old Soviet T34 tank, a commemorative exhibit, to move a few metres towards the police cordon. Yet they seem to have “overlooked” the fact that the country was a sovereign parliamentary republic with free multi-party elections, in which political decisions are made by the deputies in parliament and political parties, not on the streets. Their flags — besides those aping the revolutionary ones with the Soviet-style coats of arms cut out — bore the stripes of the historical dynasty of the Árpáds; only this symbol was very much tainted by having been on the armbands of Hungarian Nazi “Arrow Cross” murderous gangs of 1944. Still, Marx’s words about historical events being played out first as tragedy and then as a comedy were here more appropriate than ever before.

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