



THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ  
*Natural Resources and Society*

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ



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# The Hungarian Historical Review

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## *Natural Resources and Society*

Gábor Demeter and Beatrix F. Romhányi  
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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Deszkafalak és potyavacsorák: Választói magatartás Pesten a Tisza Kálmán-korszakban [Plank walls and freebee dinners: Voter behavior in Pest in the era of Kálmán Tisza]. By Péter Gerhard. Budapest: Korall, 2019. 371 pp.

How do social circumstances or social background influence the choices people make when they vote? In his recent book, historian Péter Gerhard focuses on this question and other issues involving voting habits and trends. As one of the most relevant fields within political science and political sociology, clearly these concerns have not escaped the attention of scholars, but Gerhard raises these questions in the context of a period in the history of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy when only a small percentage (6–7 percent) of the population could vote, and those who voted did so in open elections. According to the prevailing image of elections in the Dualist Era among laymen (an image which is based in no small part on depictions of the elections in works of contemporary literature), the process involved manipulation and corruption. Among historians, however, over the course of recent decades, numerous new perspectives have been taken into consideration, and a much more nuanced understanding of this image has emerged. Gerhard has contributed to this with his research, in which he has focused on Budapest and the elections to the national assembly in three of the voting districts of Budapest (Belváros, Terézváros, and Ferencváros-Kőbánya) in 1878, 1881, and 1884.

Gerhard's investigation, which draws heavily on the theoretical literature in political sociology and political science, seeks first and foremost to draw a map of the social status of voters and the party preferences of the various social groups and their attitudes towards the prevailing social relations. He also examines the roles of the people and authorities who represented (local) power.

One of the most strikingly innovative features of the monograph is the groups of sources on which the examination draws and the systematic way in which Gerhard compares them. The foundation of the discussion is a database which is built on three kinds of documents (voter registries, election records, and voting lists). Clearly, these sources made it possible for Gerhard to provide a quantitative analysis. He does not content himself merely with these sources, however, as a structural analysis will not capture individual decisions which, in the case of voting trends, necessarily add shades of nuance to the general image that emerges on the basis of statistics. Gerhard recognizes this methodological

problem and complements his analysis with two case studies in which he draws on ego-documents (diaries, letters) and articles from the press at the time.

Gerhard essentially approaches the questions he raises from two methodological perspectives. First, drawing in part on tendencies in the sociological study of elections, he follows a tendency which began to emerge prominently in historical research in England in the 1960s, which used quantitative analyses to examine voting habits from the point of view of the social circumstances of the individual groups of voters. Second, he borrows from the trend in the historiography which takes into consideration the various “turns” and their relevance to the study of elections. These works tended to focus on the cultural turn and usually examined the symbols and the language used in political campaigns. In his discussion of the campaigns, Gerhard also uses the methodology inspired by the spatial turn.

The title of the book (“plank walls and freebee dinners”) indicates one of Gerhard’s basic premises, namely that campaigns had a decisive effect on voter behavior, as did efforts to mobilize voters and techniques used by those in power to exert influence. This idea also finds expression in the structure of the book. After having familiarized his reader with the theoretical framework of his investigation, Gerhard offers two chapters (the second and third) in which he provides a detailed picture of the legal and social context.

The fourth chapter offers narrative portraits of the individuals who ran as candidates in the elections in question, the distinctive aspects of the campaigns, and the events which took place on election day. Gerhard analyzes the campaigns and the efforts to mobilize voters from the perspective of uses of space. How did the authorities and the various groups of voters try to influence and monitor space? What roles did public and private spaces play in the course of the election campaigns? Gerhard comes to the conclusion that, with the exception of some events organized by the opposition, the events of the campaigns were limited largely to semi-public and private spaces. The “street,” as it were, was not as important as a political space at the time. The explanation for the limitation of events to semi-public and private spaces lies in the fact that this allowed the representatives of power to maintain control over the events surrounding the elections, which included opportunities to give voice to political opinion. However, public spaces still played two important roles in the campaigns and elections. They provided sites for candidates to make symbolically important public appearances and they also served as places where mass support found expression, for instance in flags, posters, and processions.

In his discussion of these questions, Gerhard considers the issue of maintaining order on the day of the election, a task in which the police, the military, and even men chosen by the individual parties took part. In order to ensure that the elections could take place smoothly and confrontations and fights could be avoided (and non-voters could be kept distant), one of the most important tasks was simply keeping the different voting camps separate (with the construction of plank walls or barriers). In the course of the elections on which Gerhard focuses in his investigation (with the exception of one), there were no incidents of violence. This was thanks to the professional conduct of the authorities and the parties, which worked together with them.

Additional campaign elements were used, alongside the other factors which influenced the outcomes of the elections. The local representatives of the parties (so-called “*honoráciorok*,” or “*honoraries*”) were responsible for the coordination of these efforts. These honoraries contributed to the campaign and the election process in several ways, ranging from the selection of the individual candidates (through the organization of the campaign) to participation in the electoral committees. Though the nuanced techniques used in political campaigns began to emerge around the turn of the century, the people behind these efforts already had a wide range of tools to mobilize voters. They organized dinners, for instance, which were intended to sway voters in part by offering them food and drink.

The analysis of voter behavior in the fifth chapter is, in light of all this, understandable, as are the two case studies in the sixth chapter. Gerhard examines the groups of voters from several perspectives (for instance profession, place of residence, and age), and he uncovers interconnections between the ways in which people voted and their social status.

With this examination, the book brings us closer to an understanding of the kinds of considerations which influence the ways in which people vote, a question which is of concern to many people today. More specifically, are people more swayed by what one might term “*rational*” considerations, or are they influenced by “*emotional*” factors? Are they swayed by social or political pressures, or do they sometimes seek simply to conform to the social circles within which they move? Since the elections were open, the last two questions can be discussed, as the analysis of the votes cast by office holders illustrates. Gerhard also offers insights into the ritual nature of the elections and their distinctive choreography, which made the whole process a kind of community event. According to Gerhard, those who refrained from voting both rejected

this ritual and refused to allow their political views to become a matter of public knowledge. Given this, one cannot help but find particularly interesting his conclusion that the least active people in this process were office holders of high status and members of the political and scientific elites.

The virtues of the Gerhard's inquiry notwithstanding, one cannot help but note a significant shortcoming. In a discussion of voter behavior, it would have been essential to have noted that the frameworks within which information concerning politics and political parties was communicated differed dramatically from the frameworks in the rest of the country, and these frameworks exerted an important influence on perceptions of both political issues and the individual parties.

Péter Gerhard's book constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the political culture of the time by offering a rigorous look at the behavior of a segment of voters in the capital city during the Dualist Era. Furthermore, the book is interesting and enjoyable in no small part because of the excellent pictures, maps, and tables found in the appendix.

Réka Matolcsi  
Eötvös Loránd University



THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

## Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

## The Hungarian Historical Reviews

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