



THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ  
*Natural Resources and Society*

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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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Tiltott kapcsolat: A magyar–lengyel ellenzéki együttműködés 1976–1989 [A forbidden relationship: Oppositional cooperation between Hungarians and Poles, 1976–1989]. By Miklós Mitrovits. Budapest: Jaffa, 2020. 304 pp.

The new book by Miklós Mitrovits, a historian with several volumes to his credit whose research until now has focused primarily on Poland in the postwar period and on Polish-Hungarian relations, explores unauthorized forms of cooperation between the oppositional forces in the two countries in the decade and a half leading up to 1989. Drawing on a wide range of documentary evidence, contemporaneous samizdat publications, and thirteen original interviews with key participants, *A Forbidden Relationship* covers different shades of political and cultural opposition in Hungary to propose a convincing if not entirely original thesis: the opposition in Poland had a significant impact on the formation and development of dissident and oppositional thought and practice in Kádár's Hungary, especially around the time of the “Solidarity crisis” in 1980–81.

Mitrovits studies political-ideological connections that went beyond the idea of a “traditional friendship” between the two peoples. He is primarily interested in the reception and impact of Polish developments in Hungary, especially among leading (male) members of the democratic, human rights-based opposition (Gábor Demszky, János Kis, Ferenc Kószeg, Bálint Magyar, and others) as well as autonomous thinkers and writers (such as Sándor Csoóri and László Nagy), several of whom (Grácia Kerényi, Csaba Gy. Kiss, István Kovács) were also professionally into Polish Studies. In other words, Mitrovits employs a rather well-rehearsed concept of dissent and opposition and focuses primarily on actors who have already been canonized as leading participants in such initiatives. At the same time, Mitrovits' book also addresses the question of mutuality, transmitting the admittedly more modest resonances Hungarian trends had in Poland.

The nine chapters of the book evince an equal interest in experiences abroad and their reception “at home,” political inspirations and technical learning, repressive measures and intellectual solidarity, adaptation attempts and societal differences between the two countries. They draw on meticulous original research and cover a host of relevant subjects, without however developing a clear and precise analytical language to distinguish different types and levels of impact and reception.

Mitrovits combines an essentially chronological treatment with thematic intermezzos to explore the beginnings of a relationship in the mid- to late 1970s; the “Solidarity crisis” and its reception by and impact on the formation of a new type of Hungarian opposition; changes in these connections brought about by the implementation of martial law in Poland; the reactions of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and Hungarian society (which admittedly slightly exceeds the scope of his core subject); the presence of the Hungarian opposition and the continued remembrance of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in Poland; discourses around the Central European idea; university students and especially their peace activism; and Polish-Hungarian connections on the eve of regime changes in 1989. These diverse chapters allow Mitrovits to cover practically all essential aspects of his subject, even if he does so at the price of several rather sudden shifts between different subjects and levels of analysis.

The opening chapter, entitled “Parallel Realities,” contrasts the socialist regimes of Hungary and Poland in the 1960s and 1970s, at one point even calling the former socially inclusive and the latter exclusive (p.20). Mitrovits thereby aims to account for the fact that the opportunity structures for oppositional activities differed radically in the two countries. After all, the institutional foundations for political opposition, societal-worker resistance, and a high level of Catholic independence were all present in Poland, and this was hardly the case in Hungary. Mitrovits subsequently explains that numerous Hungarian dissidents were interested in programmatic articles published in Polish as well as the more mundane techniques of producing *samizdat*. These dissidents (Bálint Magyar and Gábor Demszky were perhaps the two most notable among them, and their stories and political affairs are covered rather extensively in the book) repeatedly visited Poland from 1977 onwards to experience a political awakening and learn its lessons. However, it was the meteoric rise of Solidarity in 1980–81 that added dynamism to the main flying university in Budapest, the so-called Monday Free University (*bétfői szabadegyetem*), and catalyzed the launch of various *Samizdat* initiatives in the country.

Mitrovits is right to conclude in this first section of his book that the newly formed Hungarian democratic opposition, which consisted mostly of sociologists, economists, and philosophers, developed its own fora and conceived of practically all its initial political acts under the impact of recent developments in Poland. He is also correct to note that the involvement of workers in the Hungarian democratic opposition’s activities remained miniscule, and this significantly distinguished it from its Polish counterpart. Put more bluntly, the

Hungarian democratic opposition may have seemed much like KOR but without the latter's crucial relationships to workers. It is rather telling, regarding context, timing, and scope, that *Beszélő*, the main Hungarian samizdat journal of the 1980s, which was indeed edited, published, and distributed in line with Polish conspirational methods, started to appear only around the time when Wojciech Jaruzelski introduced martial law, and even then, as was critically remarked by György Dalos at the time, no open expressions of “solidarity with Solidarity” could be recorded in Hungary (p.145).

The imposition of martial law in Poland strictly limited personal contacts between opposition members in the two countries. It was also a time to draw new lessons and debate oppositional prospects and strategies in Hungary. As Mitrovits shows, the example of Poland remained pivotal to participants in Hungary's democratic opposition well beyond December 13, 1981. Demszky's independent book publishing venture *AB* would soon release three volumes of Polish writings, and János Kis' analysis of the Polish and wider regional crisis inaugurated the first extended debate in the pages of *Beszélő*. However, as Mitrovits rightly notes in one of his rather occasional remarks regarding the history of political thought, such reflections and inspirations could not hide the fact that Hungarian contributors often rehearsed ideas already familiar in Hungary, for instance ideas concerning the need for a “third-way compromise” and the introduction of a new social contract (p.123).

Mitrovits shows that, despite the notable activities in Poland by the likes of Waclaw Felczak and (Warsaw-based Hungarian) Ákos Engelmayer and despite some interest in subjects such as the activities of the Hungarian democratic opposition, the lives of Hungarian minority communities abroad, or the aspirations and unfolding of 1956 (which, unlike in Hungary, could be freely discussed and even commemorated in Poland), the relationship clearly remained asymmetrical. The case of Hungary simply did not emerge as a key subject among the much more numerous members of Polish oppositional circles. But translations of historical, literary, and cultural works assured a degree of cross-fertilization, and autonomous intellectuals in the two countries were brought closer via what Mitrovits calls their “legal cultural opposition,” which was chiefly expressed through their “post-colonialist re-imagining” of the Central European idea. As Mitrovits shows, the Hungarian youth of the 1980s may have been vested in a host of new issues, but like its predecessors, it came under the impact of novel forms of Polish activism, such as those practiced by the Freedom and Peace (*Wolność i Pokój*) movement. This was especially true for university students

at the Bibó Special College (*Bibó Szakkollegium*), who would soon play key roles in launching the Alliance of Young Democrats.

Mitrovits' closing reflections on 1989 reveal how intertwined and still how different the two countries' respective exits from their communist regimes were. While the establishment in Hungary of an independent trade union and the initiation of roundtable talks indeed appeared to have closely followed the "Polish recipe," when parts of Hungarian oppositional forces refused to compromise on fully free parliamentary elections and this intransigence sharply divided the local opposition, Hungarian developments quickly moved beyond their purported model. The foundation of Polish–Hungarian Solidarity and the visit to Hungary of several prominent Poles in 1989 could change little about the fact that Hungarians drew rather different conclusions. By 1989, Poland's impact may have been widely and profoundly felt, but it was less than decisive.

The monograph thus tells the story of a major foreign inspiration and catalyst behind Hungarian liberal democratization, a catalyst the impressive societal organization and specific political path of which its dedicated Hungarian sympathizers were ultimately unable to imitate. In other words, Miklós Mitrovits has written a book on the impact of Polish ideas, developments, and solutions on Hungary between 1976 and 1989 as well as the clear limits of their influence. Historians of East Central Europe with an interest in late communist regimes and oppositional activities will certainly appreciate Mitrovits' research, which, all in all, is perhaps more impressive for its abundant detail and precision than as an attempt to reconceptualize its subject.

Ferenc Laczó  
Maastricht 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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