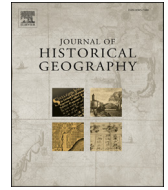




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The concept of the Carpathian Basin: its evolution, counternarratives, and geopolitical implications

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ABSTRACT

The Carpathian Basin has been the most significant Hungarian geographical notion. Despite its relatively short history, the concept has antecedents related to the long historical process of Hungary's (self-) recognition and (self-) definition in a mostly landlocked environment. Through a critical geopolitical lens, this article investigates how and why the Carpathian Basin emerged as a geographical concept and with what effects. Before even being fully explored, the Carpathians served as a solid reference point to demarcate Hungary at a time when it was not a sovereign state. From the 1910s till the 1940s, the gradually emerging notion of the Carpathian Basin was employed to preserve, and later claim, the territory it was designated to cover. Yet the environmentally determinist ideas of Hungarian geographers – partly based on a selective reading of foreign sources – were harshly countered by their colleagues elsewhere, whose arguments were similarly tendentious but drew less on geographical determinism. The Hungarian interwar establishment's staunch longing for the unity of the Carpathian Basin, though supported by many, also implied the mobilisation of the whole society towards this goal, pointing to links between foreign and domestic policy.

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Introduction

The concept of the Carpathian Basin (*Kárpát-medence*) has arguably been the most fundamental notion in Hungarian geographical thought. This was certainly the case during the 1930s and 1940s, and it has been gradually increasing again since the 1980s. Yet considering Hungary's long history, the concept's success during its few decades of prevalence is remarkable. However, the Carpathian Basin did not suddenly step out of the dark and its emergence was not a coincidence. Instead, it was a key tool for justifying Hungarian territorial claims after 1920. This article will therefore explain how and why the concept evolved, and will use a critical geopolitical lens to explore its motivations and effects. In addition, some of its counternarratives will also be described. This is necessary considering the contested character of the Carpathian Basin and other geographical narratives that remain influential in the present.

Geographical labels have never been neutral, and their politics

and power had already been criticised by the American geographer Donald Meinig in the 1950s.¹ Since the 1980s, critical geopolitics have emerged to put such imaginaries under critical scrutiny. A political geographical imagination has been defined as 'the way in which people experience, conceive of, or desire a particular configuration of the relationship between space, ethnicity, nation, and political community.'² It has been noted how geopolitical discourse is not just language, but language and practice.³ There are two tenets arising from critical geopolitics that are particularly relevant to this study. One is that geopolitical discourses typically emerge at times of major crises and changes, which often bring a reformulation of geopolitical visions and a rearticulation of geographical representations deemed necessary to justify foreign policy changes.⁴ The other is that foreign and domestic policy are almost always intertwined. Accordingly,

² N. Megeran, For ethnography in political geography: Experiencing and re-imagining Ferghana Valley boundary closures, *Political Geography* 25 (2006) 623.

³ M. Müller, Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics: towards discourse as language and practice, *Political Geography* 27 (2008) 322–335.

⁴ V. Mamadouh and G. Dijkink, Geopolitics, International Relations and Political geography: the politics of geopolitical discourse, *Geopolitics* 11 (2006) 357.

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¹ J.D. Sidaway, V. Mamadouh and M. Power, Reappraising geopolitical traditions, in: K. Dodds, M. Kuus and J. Sharp (Eds), *The Ashgate research companion to critical geopolitics*, Farnham and Burlington, 2013, 181.

[g]eopolitical imagination entails a synthesis of looking inward for political identity engineered by state-driven spatial images and discourses, and outward visions that instruct policy strategies in foreign affairs. The former provides meanings and rationalization for the latter, while the latter reinforces a collective identity ...⁵

It is by carrying this conceptual framework in mind that the rise and effects of the Carpathian Basin are here investigated.

The antecedents of the Carpathian Basin

It took a long time for the concept of the Carpathian Basin to come into being. The denomination first appeared in the late nineteenth century in physical geographic contexts, but it was very rarely used up until the interbellum.⁶ The early 1920s also saw the appearance of the Carpathian Basin in German (*Karpathenbecken*) and English.⁷ The story of the Hungarian equivalent is more complicated as more or less similar concepts had gradually been emerging earlier. What makes the rise of Kárpát-medence complex is the long process through which Hungary's geographical position and extent were defined in a largely – and since 1920 fully – landlocked environment.

A need to create an image of a large, wealthy and strong Hungary was already felt in the sixteenth century by Nicolaus Olahus, Archbishop of Esztergom and Primate of Hungary.⁸ Just a decade following the Battle of Mohács – a key event in a series of Hungarian territorial losses to the Ottomans – in 1536 he consciously delimited Hungary as oriented to four rivers: the Danube, Tisza, Drava, and Sava. At the time of publication, this was of course a rather aspirational vision. Yet as the map in Olahus's later republished book illustrates, the exact definition of Hungary was still far from clear (Fig. 1).

In the late eighteenth century, the first modern Hungarian-language geographical monograph described Hungary's borderlands as characterised by woody mountains and pinewoods, with references to the Carpathians.⁹ Accordingly, already the first half of the nineteenth century saw a number of volumes depicting the country as divided from its neighbours by strong, stable, natural borders; especially the Carpathian Mountains, but also a number of rivers.¹⁰ Although a belief in natural borders and environmental determinism was not unique at the time, its later impact and (geo) political significance is truly remarkable in the case of Hungary – as will be shown.

Moreover, a number of non-Hungarian scholars – either partly or fully – confirmed this belief and were also cited by Hungarian geographers.¹¹ Austrian geographer Adolf Schmidl gave mountains

an even more exclusive role in delimiting Hungary than did his Hungarian contemporaries, in portraying the Kingdom of Hungary and its *Nebenländer* (outlying lands) as situated between the Alps and the Carpathians, noting that the latter 'enclose the Great Hungarian Plain in a wide circle'.¹² Similarly, German historian Wilhelm Stricker depicts Hungary as 'a large, hollow shaped country encircled by mountains: the Carpathians, the Alps, and the Wallachian and Illyric ranges'.¹³ Austrian author Salomon Steinhard likewise writes about Hungary being surrounded by the bow of the Carpathians, which to the north and the east also form the political borders of Hungary and Transylvania (and in the case of the latter, those of the Habsburg Monarchy).¹⁴ Steinhard even describes the Carpathians as a partition wall and Transylvania as a mountain bulwark and fortress towards the European Orient, easy to secure and militarily significant in case of 'political developments in the East'.¹⁵ Last but not least, the Transylvanian Highlands are noted to be most easily accessible from Hungary, but much more difficultly for enemies from Moldova and Wallachia, with 'the high mountains that stretch along the border protecting the land as the best bulwarks'.

Such descriptions were particularly useful at a time when Hungary's delimitation was still unclear and its borderlands were relatively unknown. Despite the recurring image of strong, natural, stable borders the very definition of what constituted Hungary remained ambiguous. To a lesser extent, this was related to the still rather underdeveloped cartographic and technological toolkit available to measure the exact extent of various entities within and beyond the country.¹⁶ But more crucially, interpretations of Hungary included narrower and broader definitions, by Hungarian and non-Hungarian authors alike.¹⁷ This can be explained with the fact that Hungary was not a sovereign state at this time, but constituted one of the crownlands of the monarchy (see note 14). Yet Steinhard grouped the twenty Habsburg crownlands into four categories: the German *Bundesländer* (which belonged to the German Confederation), Hungarian lands 'in the broadest sense', Polish lands, and Italian lands.¹⁸

Regarding Hungary, then, Fényes provided four different definitions.¹⁹ The narrowest interpretation would imply the 'mother country' – the crownland (Kingdom) of Hungary. The narrow definition would include Croatia and Slavonia, 'which are also administered by Hungarian law'. In a broad sense Hungary would include Transylvania, which, 'although having a separate political administration and diet, is an irrefragable pearl of the Hungarian crown, and is similar to the mother country in its basic structure'. Finally, Fényes understood Hungary 'in its broadest sense as all provinces that had once belonged to the Hungarian crown', specifically: Hungary, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Bosnia, Serbia, Wallachia, and Moldova. Fényes then sets out that in this volume the second – 'narrow' – definition is applied, but without

⁵ X. Su, Geopolitical imagination and the US war on drugs against China, *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8 (2020) 217.

⁶ L. Dapsy, Termelési vázlatok, *Néptanítók Lapja* 13 (1880) 99; G. Czirbusz, Alföldünk állóvizei, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 19 (1891) 267.

⁷ R. Gragger, *Ungarische Jahrbücher* 1 (1921) 2, 61, 156; A. Dániel, The agrarian problem in Hungary, *The Slavonic Review* 1 (1922) 151–171.

⁸ Z. Hajdú, A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület közötti kapcsolatok elemzése a magyar földrajztudományban 1863–1947 között, in: R. Györi and Z. Hajdú (Eds.), *Kárpát-medence: települések, tájak, régiók, térstruktúrák*, Pécs and Budapest, 2006, 392.

⁹ Gy. Szaller, *Magyar ország földleírásának rövid foglalattya*, Pozsony, 1796, 4.

¹⁰ P. Magda, *Magyar országnak és a határ őrző vidékének leg újabb statisztikai és geográfiai leírása*, Pest, 1819, 22; P. Magda, *Neueste statistisch-geographische Beschreibung des Königreichs Ungarn, Croatien, Slavonien und der ungarischen Militär-Grenze*, Leipzig, 1832, 3–4; E. Fényes, *Magyarország statisztikája*, Pest, 1842, 1–3, 8; I. Vahot, *Magyarföld és népei eredeti képekben*, Pest, 1846, 5, 9, 11.

¹¹ J. Hunfalvy, *A magyar birodalom természeti viszonyainak leírása* Volume 1, Pest, 1863, 28–29, 128; F. Fodor, *A magyar földrajztudomány története*, Budapest, 2006.

¹² A. Schmidl, *Reisehandbuch durch das Königreich Ungarn*, Vienna, 1835, 15, 18. Hungarian statistician Elek Fényes at least refers to Hungary's western borders as artificial. Fényes, *Magyarország statisztikája*, 8.

¹³ W. Stricker, *Ungarn und Siebenbürgen*, Frankfurt am Main, 1847, 28.

¹⁴ S. Steinhard, *Oesterreich und sein Volk in Bildern und Skizzen* Volume 1, Leipzig, 1859, 194–203. By political borders within the monarchy Steinhard refers to those of its crownlands, which however had very limited autonomy in the 1850s. Still, up to 1867 Hungary and Transylvania formed two different crownlands of the monarchy. Steinhard, *Oesterreich und sein Volk*, 82–83.

¹⁵ Steinhard, *Oesterreich und sein Volk*, 199, 278–279.

¹⁶ Fényes, *Magyarország statisztikája*, 3–5.

¹⁷ Fényes, *Magyarország statisztikája*, 1; Steinhard, *Oesterreich und sein Volk*, 83.

¹⁸ Steinhard, *Oesterreich und sein Volk*, 83.

¹⁹ E. Fényes, *Magyarország leírása* Volume 2, Pest, 1847, 3.



Fig. 1. This old map of Hungary clearly portrays the country as bounded by mountains to the north, but Croatia and Transylvania are much more vaguely depicted (largely covered by shadow and a posy, respectively). Source: N. Olahus, *Hungaria et Atila*, Vindobona [Vienna], 1763, title page.

specifying any reasons for his choice.²⁰

The exact size and components of Hungary remained an issue even for the country's first geography professor in the first half of the 1860s. Perhaps due to this uncertainty, based on orographic conditions János Hunfalvy concluded that 'in its environmental circumstances the Hungarian empire has generally got a clear character and is a geographic unity; thus its borders are – with a few exceptions – natural, demarcated by mountain ridges and rivers'.²¹ Hunfalvy did at least note that this empire's borders in the south (Croatia) lacked a natural delineation, but even here he assigned the rivers Una and Sava a special importance. Hunfalvy's work was important for Hungarian geographical thought in at least two respects. On the one hand, systematically adopting the label 'Hungarian empire' expressed a clear anti-Austrian stance, implying that Hungary is of an imperial character and thus on par with the Austrian Empire.²² This compound would then stick and survive well into the first half of the twentieth century in geography and social and natural sciences alike.²³ On the other hand, Hunfalvy devoted a stronger importance than earlier writers to environmental conditions in Hungary's formation and existence.

²⁰ Fényes, *Magyarország leírása*, 4. Fényes was trained as a lawyer and often focused on administrative-legal dimensions. His romantic descriptions of Hungary in its 'broader' and 'broadest' sense are therefore even more curious and telling.

²¹ Hunfalvy, *A magyar birodalom természeti viszonyainak leírása*, 112–113.

²² Hajdú, *A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület*, 394. Yet Hunfalvy was not first to use this term: a slightly earlier book on the basic laws of the Hungarian empire deals mainly with Hungary, but to some extent also Transylvania. F. Toldy, *A magyar birodalom alaptörvényei*, Buda, 1861, ix.

²³ E. Fényes, *A magyar birodalom nemzetiségei*, Pest, 1867; K. Ballagi and P. Király, *A magyar birodalom leírása*, Budapest, 1878; F. Hazslinszky, *A magyar birodalom moh-főrdája*, Budapest, 1885; G. Horváth, *A magyar birodalom állatvilága (Fauna Regni Hungariae)*, Budapest, 1896; I. Acsády, *A magyar birodalom története* Volume 1, Budapest, 1903; K. Papp, *A magyar birodalom vasérc- és köszénkészlete*, Budapest, 1915; K. Kertész, *A magyar birodalom legyeinek synopsisa, Matematikai és Természettudományi Értesítő* 38 (1921) 352–353; S. Pethő, *Világostól Trianonig*, Budapest, 1925; E. Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, *Egyetlen út: a magyar paraszt*, Budapest, 1938; J. Abrudbányai, Szántsatok új szántást, *Keresztény Magvető* 74 (1942) 86.

Again, such ideas were impacted by and in line with various foreign sources, including influential ones. In his discussion of physical barriers to mobility Friedrich Ratzel specifically mentions the Southern Carpathians in Transylvania, 'on the peaks of which there is only wilderness, and where people cannot permanently settle'.²⁴ For Ratzel, such high mountains often pose an even stronger barrier to transportation than seas and large deserts. Although he grouped Hungary among countries whose borders only partially overlap with natural boundaries, Ratzel later described it as largely demarcated by surrounding mountains.²⁵

In the Hungarian translation of his first volume of *Anthropogeographie*, Ratzel had agreed to an addendum on Hungary which is strongly inspired by his thinking.²⁶ This states that 'Hungary is a well-developed geographical individuality. It has got natural borders beyond which it has not expanded permanently, and within which no foreign power has ever managed to set roots enduringly'. Further, 'the country's borders are the most natural and thus persistent to the north and the east; formed by the Carpathians' peak where there is little permanent human inhabitation, and from where waters and with them people descend towards two different sides'.²⁷

The addendum at least recognises that Hungary is not as neatly delineated as are islands, and that it is much more open towards south and west. But the dividing role of the Carpathians is considered so significant that it is used to explain why historical Hungarian expansions beyond it had failed, whereas Transylvania and Croatia remained parts of the country. Although the latter two regions' distinct features are acknowledged (such as their shape, climate, products, and population), they nevertheless complement Hungary's 'geographical unity'. According to the addendum, while

²⁴ F. Ratzel, *A Föld és az ember: anthropo-geographia*, Budapest, 1887, 227.

²⁵ Ratzel, *A Föld és az ember*, 149; F. Ratzel, *Politische Geographie*, München and Leipzig, 1897, 314, 485, 655.

²⁶ Hajdú, *A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület*, 395.

²⁷ Ratzel, *A Föld és az ember*, 588–589.

such distinctions can lead to fragmentation, this is counterbalanced by the mutual economic interdependence of the country's territorial components, acting as a centripetal force. This illustrates that besides the dominance of environmental determinism, early versions of functional integrationist ideas were also invoked in justifying Hungary's unity. Interestingly enough, mutual economic interdependence is also mentioned as a partial explanation for continued Austro-Hungarian coexistence, thereby legitimising the status quo within Hungary and the monarchy alike.²⁸

There is at least one more idea in the addendum of Ratzel's Hungarian translation that is worth mentioning. The Great Hungarian Plain is described as the country's centre, which was first to be occupied by the state-founding Hungarians, and from where they pushed 'weaker peoples' already present towards the mountains all around.²⁹ Thus the weak found refuge in the mountains – as did Hungarians themselves during the Turkish occupation. This way, the later recurrent idea of Hungarian supremacy in the Carpathian Basin, centred around the Great Hungarian Plain, was nourished.

Finally, in the Hungarian translation of his *L'homme et la terre* Élisée Reclus starts his prologue thus: 'In the large book of our Earth how magnificent and proudly written is the page of Hungary! The mountains encircle the country as a huge amphitheatre, each of which telling about a different age of the Earth's history'.³⁰

Calm before the storm

The period of 1887–1910 saw few noted Hungarian analyses on the formation, shape, and borders of Hungary. Instead, descriptions of its various landscapes and counties tended to dominate, and monographs of extra European territories started to appear. This could be explained by a consensus in mainstream thinking about the views laid out in the major tomes of Hunfalvy and Ratzel, the marginalisation of alternative approaches (see below), but perhaps also by the relative (geo)political stability during this period. The late nineteenth century was nevertheless important for other reasons. On the one hand, geographical knowledge was spreading from university departments to the wider public, especially through the national curriculum but also mass publications.³¹ Knowledge about and engagement with the Carpathians was also popularised by the Hungarian Carpathian Association, established in 1873 as Hungary's first touristic organisation.³² On the other hand, Hungarian geographers were almost ignoring the fact that their country still remained a constituent of the Habsburg Empire, and mostly dealt with Hungary alone rather than with the Dual Monarchy as an entity in their analyses.³³

One notable exception in the midst of this relative calm was Rezső Havass, whose work focused on Hungarian influence towards the south. At a time when the idea that Hungary's borders to the north, east, and west were demarcated by mountains was already well established, the country's delineation in the southwest was still ambiguous, not just in a geographical but also legal sense. Although the Hungarian-Croatian Compromise of 1868 regarded

Dalmatia as a sub-unit of Hungary (itself a subject of the monarchy), that province remained de facto administered by Austria – which was nevertheless contested by Havass.³⁴ In addition, the monarchy occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and annexed them in 1908, with the provinces becoming a shared Austro-Hungarian condominium. In addition to this short-distance imperialism and uncertainty regarding Hungary's southern demarcation, what triggered Havass's interest in the Balkans and the Adriatic Sea were perceived opportunities for Hungarian expansion through Fiume, then Hungary's port city, not least by the construction of the Suez Canal.³⁵ But not many of the Hungarian colonial visions could be realised, and the country's borders did not change between the compromise with Austria and World War I.

This period of relative silence in mainstream geography was clearly broken in the 1910s as the Dual Monarchy was about to collapse. Following an environmentally determinist tradition, Jenő Cholnoky argued that state formations too 'needed to obey nature's pressure'.³⁶ Cholnoky believed that good, natural borders were the most important condition for a durable state, and he considered Great Britain and Hungary as the most fortunately delimited countries in Europe. Further, he argued that rivers are not good natural boundaries, but instead 'a mountain range is the really good political border'.³⁷ Based on this, Cholnoky too called for southward Hungarian expansion in order to secure a mountainous natural boundary in the south. The basic idea behind this was a belief in the stability of 'basin states' and that European states should not fear each other 'but the political formation of much larger Asian basins'.³⁸

In a similar vein, Gyula Prinz ignored the internal administrative border between Hungary and Croatia as the country's natural boundaries cannot be river borders, which must be considered unnatural; only mountains can form the natural boundaries of a basin state.³⁹ Similarly to the above cited addendum in Ratzel's translated book, Prinz distinguished the Great Hungarian Plain – the country's centre – from the peripheral areas. It is then natural that the state had since early on tried to acquire Transylvania, which serves as a huge bulwark. Based on the above and the idea that 'the landscape gives birth to the state', Prinz found that 'the Hungarian state had grown into its natural geographic region', thus forming a 'natural roundish whole'.⁴⁰ At one point pragmatically deriving from his determinist positions, he noted that the country had enduringly only expanded outside its natural, physical geographic optimum towards the Adriatic Sea, which is justified by access thereto becoming the basis of the Hungarian state's independence. But overall, Prinz stuck to geographical determinism and concluded more generally that 'the rich and strongly delineated fragmentation of our continent has formed many autonomous, tightly enclosed, unitary territories. Europe's states have been forced within the boundaries of morphological areas'.⁴¹

Intensive preparations for the post-WWI peace negotiations

Immediately following World War I, key Hungarian geographers published a manifesto in the name of the Hungarian Geographical

²⁸ Ratzel, *A Föld és az ember*, 590–592. It can be noted that following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 Hungarian nationalism was partly saturated, with Hungarians enjoying a higher recognition and status than the Slavic constituents of the monarchy up until its breakup.

²⁹ Ratzel, *A Föld és az ember*, 592.

³⁰ E. Reclus, *A Föld és életjelenségei* Volume 1, Budapest, 1880.

³¹ Hajdú, *A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület*, 395–396, 401.

³² Magyarországi Kárpát Egyesület, <http://www.karpategyesulet.hu/> last accessed 16 November 2020.

³³ Z. Hajdú, *Trianon és a magyar földrajztudomány, Közép-Európai Közlemények* 3: 4 (2010) 20, 23.

³⁴ Z. Hajdú, *Magyarország közigazgatási földrajza*, Budapest and Pécs, 2001, 93–95.

³⁵ R. Havass, *A szueszi csatorna tekintettel különös a mai gyarmati politikára és Fiumére*, Budapest, 1887.

³⁶ J. Cholnoky, *A tartós államalakulásokról*, *Magyar Figyelő* 1:1 (1911) 71.

³⁷ J. Cholnoky, *Magyarország természetes déli határa*, *Magyar Figyelő* 4:3 (1914) 433.

³⁸ Cholnoky, *Magyarország természetes déli határa*, 436–437.

³⁹ Hajdú, *A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület*, 398.

⁴⁰ Gy. Prinz, *Magyarország földrajza*, Budapest, 1914, 163–167.

⁴¹ Prinz, *Magyarország földrajza*, 178–179.

Society that addressed the world's geographical societies and called for the territorial integrity of historical Hungary.⁴² This states that geographical knowledge needs to be taken into account in the preparation of peace treaties in general, and of border drawings in particular. The manifesto does mention German geographical research, but strategically draws more on knowledge produced by the winners. Selectively citing Élisée Reclus and Albert Perry Brigham, these geographers tried to prove that before the war prominent French and Anglo-Saxon geographers had emphasised Hungary's wonderful physical geographic unity. Further, in referring to Paul Vidal de la Blache they claimed that a geographical unity is not just a result of geology and climate regions but also of human agency and society. Accordingly, the individuality of the Central Danube Basin had to a significant degree been determined by the thousand-year agency of the Hungarians, forming it into a unique Hungarian landscape.

The manifesto tried to adopt insights from French geography (including by Emmanuel de Martonne) in analysing Hungary's environmental regions and the unitary large economic region which is based on natural unity. Yet the authors went beyond delimiting environmental regions in claiming that 'the natural regions today comprising Hungary form a superior economic life', the breakup of which could be disadvantageous to all areas.⁴³ The particular importance of transition zones between subnational regions lies in their formation of market belts, where a significant share of Hungarian cities developed. It is thus argued that a breakup of the country based on ethnic minority claims would be economically disadvantageous to all – although it is recognised that Hungarians would suffer most. The manifesto claims that a consistent adoption of the nationality principle would result in Hungary's breakup into no less than thirty-four parts. Accordingly, in a similar concurrent manifesto a number of Hungarian academics suggested that at the peace conference the Hungarian delegates should utilise orographic and hydrographic rather than ethnographic maps.⁴⁴

The most influential person during this period was Count Pál Teleki, as a geographer and politician alike. As Secretary General of the Hungarian Geographical Society (1911–1923), in September 1918 he began coordinating work for the upcoming peace negotiations at which he – unlike many of his colleagues – understood that the nationality question would be the key issue. Accordingly, preparation included producing maps on Hungary which, unlike earlier ethnographic ones that only showed the territorial sprawl of various nationalities, took into account population density and thus portrayed a stronger Hungarian presence.⁴⁵ Teleki also contributed with his own (in)famous 'carte rouge', which was the only Hungarian map the peace committee eventually looked at, perhaps also because he was a member of the Hungarian delegation. In late 1918

Teleki also played a key role in setting up and running the League for Protecting the Territorial Integrity of Hungary, a propaganda organisation backed up by the Hungarian Geographical Society and intensively operating at home but especially abroad for a year and a half.⁴⁶ In addition, the Peace Preparation Bureau which Teleki was managing underground during Budapest's Romanian occupation was formally established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 1919. According to Hajdú, all key experts in a wide range of fields (such as geography, ethnography, statistics, economy, history, hydrography, energetics, agriculture, forestry) staying in Budapest at the time were involved in the work of the bureau, focusing on territorial and ethnographic issues and accumulating an amount of expertise that Hungarian scientific life had not seen in decades.

However, from the perspective of their political motives all these efforts were in vain, as was the laying out of largely geographical arguments by the head of the Hungarian delegation at the hearing of the peace committee in Versailles in January 1920. Count Albert Apponyi explicitly referred to Reclus when calling Hungary 'a perfect geographical unit unexampled in Europe', and talked of the complimentary economic nature of the country's various regions. He further employed a civilizing discourse in emphasising that 'the neighbouring nations, due to unfortunate events in their histories, joined the family of civilized nations later than us'.⁴⁷ In the end power relations were decisive, and where ethnicity was not the major principle the borders were drawn along railway lines, in most if not all cases to the disadvantage of Hungary. In this sense economic geographical factors were taken into account, but certainly not the ones envisioned by Hungarian geographers. The environmental regions they portrayed remained similarly disregarded, let alone the presumed unbreakable unity of historical Hungary. Hence, according to the Treaty of Trianon (June 4, 1920) Hungary shrank from 325,411 to 93,073 square kilometres, or about 29% of its former territory.⁴⁸ But the preparation works did lay the ground for the official revisionist politics that came to characterise the interwar era.

The heydays of the Carpathian Basin in the interwar period

Disadvantageous as it was to Hungary, a range of academic fields (including ethnography, history, law, and statistics) played a key role there in trying to delegitimise the Treaty of Trianon, but geography's role stands out. In these efforts, besides environmentally determinist thinking, economic arguments were now receiving more attention. Cholnoky for instance claimed that 'the stern truths of geography and history, especially geography, render the Paris resolution absurd', since historical Hungary had always been present as a 'closed geographical unit' in international geographic science.⁴⁹ Most likely to counter the principle of ethnic self-determination, he argued that 'it is not a shared language, religion, or race that underpins the cohesion of the basin's population, but solely economic interdependence. And this is a law against which there is no appeal'. In a similar vein, Ferenc Fodor developed the concept of 'economic landscape' in order to support the notion that historical Hungary is a harmoniously evolved 'economic geographical unit'. Thus despite the new borders Fodor set out to analyse the pre-war territory, as 'writing an economic

⁴² Anonym, A Magyar Földrajzi Társaság szövege a világ Földrajzi Társaságaihoz, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 66 (1918) 289–320. The manifesto is unauthored, but we know the persons commissioned with writing it from other sources: beyond two geographers they were two geologists, which may partly explain the environmental determinist nature of some of the arguments presented. Hajdú, *Trianon és a magyar földrajztudomány*, 26. It is unclear what impact this publication per se could have on the world's geographical societies, as it was published in Hungarian. To the best of our knowledge the manifesto was never translated, although several ideas contained therein were presented by the Hungarian delegation at the peace negotiations and doubtlessly effected Hungarian geographical thought for decades to come.

⁴³ Anonym, A Magyar Földrajzi Társaság szövege, 309.

⁴⁴ Ö. Polner, F. Kovács, A. Hodinka, Gy. Prinz and I. Lukinich, *Pro Hungaria: Magyarország igazsága, szöveg a békekonferenciához*, Pozsony, 1918.

⁴⁵ K. Kogutovics, Magyarország 1:200.000 méretű néprajzi térképe, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 66 (1918) 320–326; D.Z. Segyevy, Magyarország 1:200.000 méretarányú néprajzi térképe, *REGIO* 23:2 (2015) 77–105.

⁴⁶ Hajdú, *Trianon és a magyar földrajztudomány*, 27–29.

⁴⁷ F. Gyuris, Human geography, cartography, and statistics: a toolkit for geopolitical goals in Hungary until World War II, *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 7 (2014) 223, 233.

⁴⁸ Hajdú, *Magyarország közigazgatási földrajza*, 96, 145.

⁴⁹ J. Cholnoky, Magyarország területének épsége tudományos földrajzi szempontból, *Új Magyar Szemle* 3 (1920) 285, 291.

geography of maimed Hungary would be an inherent contradiction.⁵⁰ Although many Hungarian geographers adopted this approach in the interwar era, Fodor himself published an extensive book chapter on post-Trianon Hungary.⁵¹ In addition, Teleki worked out a territorial administrative reform plan that indeed included much of pre-war Hungary but excluded Croatia, thus (perhaps implicitly) recognising the loss of that former, autonomous part of the country.⁵² But while motivations behind his proposed ‘natural regions’ contained physical geographic, historical, economic, and settlement morphological aspects, the prime principle of their delineation was nationality.

While clearly in line with – and actively co-shaping – Hungarian revisionist aims, Teleki’s thinking was overall more multifaceted than that of many contemporary geographers. Initially largely influenced by determinist and organicist ideas of especially German geography, Teleki would later draw more on Vidal de la Blache as well as Anglo-Saxon regionalists such as Herbertson, Dyer, Taylor, and Unstead. This resulted in a particularly complex geographical thought – although one in which Teleki rarely lost sight of his ultimate geopolitical goal. He for instance believed that ‘the proportion of the European great powers was determined by relief-based large landscapes: the British Isles, the Iberian and Apennine peninsulas, the Paris Basin with its peripherally thereto clinging landscapes, and the Hungarian Basin of the Central Danube’; at the same time as he realised that technological advancements and globalisation would gradually decrease the role of these landscapes and increase that of the entire earth (as the largest landscape).⁵³ Teleki also distinguished between environmental landscapes and those ‘evolving on the basis of human and thus political will’, but then went on to argue that the two together ‘as a life unit constitute a factor of life on the earth’s surface’.⁵⁴ Further, Teleki acknowledged that ‘landscape divisions can never be sharp – nor even definite’, thus ‘even the landscapes of the Hungarian Basin are in some places difficult to demarcate according to environmental factors’.⁵⁵ Yet he did not apply the same logic when discussing pre-Trianon Hungary itself, which he described as ‘one of Europe’s state-constituting big landscapes. It is a great power landscape – although with the comparative disadvantages of being sealed off from the sea and located a little further east’. Up until World War I ‘the natural life space of the central and largest Danube Basin and that of the Hungarian nation’s state had overlapped’; but now, ‘as clear the unity of this basin is environmentally, as much it is a question mark politically’. Nevertheless, these insights did not hinder Teleki from concluding that ‘our Danube Basin is one of Europe’s great state-constituting landscapes’.⁵⁶

Accordingly, that new types of arguments were now emerging did not mean that environmental determinism was less relied on, including by Teleki. For him

the great depression, surrounded by the folds of the Carpathians, forms the most perfectly closed basin of Europe ... It is, of course, a hydrographical unit, practically all its rivers running to the center of the plain, with consecutive circular climatological and floral belts; even the animals, migrating to higher altitudes,

completely assume the unity and centralization of this region.⁵⁷

Teleki exemplifies the last point with the autumn migration patterns of certain birds: whereas the gulls of northwestern Hungary are flying southwards, the ones northwest of the Carpathians are going down along the Elbe River and then the Atlantic shore to head towards western Africa. These factors led him to conclude that ‘[i]n all respects the Carpathian Basin is well defined’ – which is the first time the compound is used by a Hungarian geographer in English, and only once in his book. Instead Teleki here sticks to synonymous terms such as ‘the Basin of the Middle Danube’ and ‘Hungarian basin’ – at a time when ‘Central Danube basin’ and ‘Hungarian empire’ were also used by natural scientists.⁵⁸ It will still take a few years before the Carpathian Basin enters the everyday language of Hungarian academics and others.

Another idea illustrating the geographical determinism still characteristic of the interwar period was provided by Gyula Prinz, a geologist turned into human geographer. According to his Tisia (the old spelling of the River Tisza) hypothesis, a large crystallised massif, once spreading out below what is now the Great Hungarian Plain, folded up the Carpathian Mountains. This led him to argue that the physical, and consequently the political, unity of Greater Hungary had been determined by tectonic processes that occurred millions of years ago.⁵⁹

Again, not much less determinist reasoning can be encountered in some contemporary works of non-Hungarian geographers. Alfred Hettner considered Czechoslovakia ‘no unitary and natural formation’ as ‘entirely German landscapes’ were attached to it, while also ‘deeply encroaching upon the Hungarian environmental area’ where it has ‘not just a completely unnatural boundary but also includes many Ruthenians and Hungarians’.⁶⁰ Although published seven years after the Treaty of Trianon, Hettner portrays Hungary and Transylvania as ‘the 300,000 square kilometre large Carpathian country’ (*Karpatenland*) that is ‘geographically one of the most individualised and enclosed areas of Europe: a fairly circular plain surrounded by higher mountains’.⁶¹ Furthermore, ‘the Carpathian country is a hydrographic unit’ as only two rivers are flowing out of it, with all the others gathering in the Danube. Hettner’s geopolitical message is clear: Hungary in its truncated form is ‘a hardly feasible state which must strive to regaining its disrupted landscapes. It is the unreason of today’s borders that motivate its perishability’. As these works are poorly referenced it is unclear whether Gyula Prinz and Hettner read each other, but the latter did cite Joseph Partsch who we know had been teaching Prinz at Breslau.⁶²

Beyond economic and environmentally determinist ideas, civilizational arguments were also employed that promoted the necessary cohesion of pre-war Hungary. These were related to notions of the collective mission of the Hungarians in Europe on the

⁵⁷ P. Teleki, *The evolution of Hungary and its place in European history*, New York, 1923, 12. Teleki published this book based on his lectures held in August 1921 at Williamstown in the US, where he was propagating for the Hungarian cause. K. Ihrig, Dr. Teleki Pál gróf: The evolution of Hungary and its place in European history, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 52 (1924) 32.

⁵⁸ Kertész, A magyar birodalom legyeinek synopsisa, 353; Z. Szilády, A magyar birodalom legyeinek synopsisa, *Matematikai és Természettudományi Értesítő* 41 (1925) 215.

⁵⁹ R. Keményfi, Egységes magyar államterület alatt egységes köztalaj: a Tisza-masszívum mítosza, in: R. Győri and Z. Hajdú (Eds), *Kárpát-medence: települések, tájak, régiók, térstruktúrák*, Pécs and Budapest, 2006, 418–438.

⁶⁰ A. Hettner, *Grundzüge der Länderkunde* Volume 1 Fourth edition, Wiesbaden, 1927, 230.

⁶¹ Hettner, *Grundzüge der Länderkunde*, 255, 258, 261.

⁶² Fodor, *A magyar földrajztudomány története*, 714.

⁵⁰ F. Fodor, *Magyarország gazdasági földrajza*, Budapest, 1924, 9.

⁵¹ F. Fodor, A trianoni Magyarország földrajza, in: S. Pethő (Ed), *Világostól Trianonig*, Budapest, 1925, 249–324.

⁵² P. Teleki, *Európáról és Magyarországról*, Budapest, 1934.

⁵³ P. Teleki, Időszerű nemzetközi politikai kérdések a politikai földrajz megvilágításában, in: M. Asztalos (Ed), *Jancsó Benedek emlékkönyv*, Budapest, 1931, 190–191.

⁵⁴ Teleki, *Időszerű nemzetközi politikai kérdések*, 201.

⁵⁵ P. Teleki, *A gazdasági élet földrajzi alapjai* Volume 2, Budapest, 1936, 437–441.

⁵⁶ Teleki, *A gazdasági élet földrajzi alapjai*, 452–453.

one hand, and that within the historical territory on the other. Showing awareness that the southern borders of historical Hungary were less naturally demarcated than the others, Teleki claimed that '[t]here is no greater contrast to be found anywhere, if you pass the imaginary line between the Continent proper and the Balkan peninsula – a line drawn from the north end of the Adriatic to the northwestern coast of the Black Sea'.⁶³ He cites John Marriott here who described this peninsula as characterised by lawlessness and caprice. Thus Teleki argued that with Hungary's historical choice of the Western civilisation over the Byzantine the basin of the Carpathians came to constitute a bulwark of the former, 'with easy means of communication to the west, a dividing barrier to the northeast and southeast, and a weak frontier to the south' – yet eventually isolating the Turks.⁶⁴ In addition, Hungarian presence in the basin divided the Slavs, who Teleki suggests would have less been able to defend European civilisation.

Also supporting the idea of Hungarian supremacy on the country's historical territory, in the 1930s Prinz developed the notion of Hungarian Mesopotamia.⁶⁵ The starting point here is that the evolution of great civilisations was preconditioned on their location on alluvial plains, such as around the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. As the landscape of the Danube and Tisza is similar, Hungary too was predicted to develop into a 'mesopotamic' country, in which the Hungarian 'core culture' would be diffused to other peoples living on the peripheries of the Carpathian Basin. While in many ways an astonishing hypothesis, Prinz was in fact inspired by not only Ratzel but also evolutionary thinkers at the time developing the theory of diffusionism. Importantly, advocates of the Mesopotamian idea traced all of Hungary's contemporary social problems and historical tragedies to Hungarian elites not sufficiently recognising this basic principle. Yet in the interwar era such thinking was also in line with official discourses, including efforts of the Hungarian Minister of Religion and Education to strengthen the 'cultural advantage' of Hungarians over their ethnic neighbours in order to allow the country's power to radiate throughout its historical territory.⁶⁶

Finally, historical arguments were clearly drawn upon by Hungarian interwar geographers to substantiate the necessary recreation of pre-war Hungary. Cholnoky, who was President of the Hungarian Geographical Society from 1914 until the end of World War II, described Greater Hungary as 'belonging to us for a thousand years and which will unconditionally be ours again, in consistency with the laws of nature'.⁶⁷

Such discourses were not just circulating among geographers and academics; irredentist politics infiltrated the whole of interwar Hungarian society. Official commemorations, the erection of monuments, and the changing of street names were commonplace to remember the lost territories; in addition, the contour of the pre-war Hungarian territory was present on countless everyday objects (including plates, ashtrays, postcards, boardgames, and so on).⁶⁸ Indeed, geographers played no small part in these developments, also by editing school textbooks and atlases (Fig. 2) that typically featured maps of Hungary showing its old and new boundaries alike. Moreover, geography was strengthened in the curriculum after 1924, with classes devoted to studying the Hungarian Basin

(besides, or even instead of, contemporary Hungary).⁶⁹

It was under such circumstances that Kárpát-medence started flourishing in the 1920s and early 1930s, especially in geography.⁷⁰ The usage of the term then gradually expanded outside the field, for instance to sociographic literature.⁷¹ This was followed by a hydrographic map of the Carpathian Basin issued by the agricultural ministry.⁷² Shortly thereafter the compound appeared in a book of a self-learned orientalist, and in another one of a far-right politician.⁷³ In the subsequent few years the Carpathian Basin literally mushroomed. It was in such an atmosphere of revanchism that Hungary entered World War II.

The Carpathian Basin during World War II and after

As an ally of Germany, between 1938 and 1941 Hungary regained about half of the areas it lost at Trianon, thus almost doubling in size but still ending up far smaller than its pre-WWI territory. During the war itself discourses of the Carpathian Basin were omnipresent. Geographers would write books on regions partly reannexed, discussing their role and place within the basin.⁷⁴ A monthly periodical entitled *Kárpátmedence* was published during 1941–1943, in which one of the articles analyses in detail the presence of ethnic Hungarians in northern Croatia, which was not regained during the war.⁷⁵ This can be seen as a sign that Hungarian irredentism was not yet saturated. In addition, Gyula Prinz now conceptually distinguished between 'country' denoting a 'natural territorial unit' and 'state territory' as a domain at a given point in time.⁷⁶ Consequently the country of Hungary is delimited by natural borders all around, within which lies a thousand year old state, 'one of the Earth's most enduring and partly most unmovable'.

Such discourses from geography also infiltrated other fields. In a journal for teachers, a contributor wrote: 'for a thousand years our thoughts have been on the wreath of the Carpathians; whatever falls within them is our ancient, unalienable property ... The evolution of our literature also instructively testifies that our culture has reached even the smallest corners of the Carpathian Basin', and so this culture needs to fill the entire basin.⁷⁷ Importantly, similar discourses appeared not just by authors from Hungary proper but also by ones from the regained territories.⁷⁸ In addition, the denomination Carpathian Basin was now also used in the natural sciences.⁷⁹

Towards the end of the war András Rónai – a disciple of Teleki – published an atlas of Central Europe, in which a map shows the age of state boundaries during the period 1000–1920 (Fig. 3). The chosen time interval was not accidental, with the former year

⁶⁹ Fodor, *A magyar földrajztudomány története*, 425–426.

⁷⁰ Zs. Bátky and K. Kogutowicz (Eds), *Kogutowicz zsebatlasza az 1922. évre*, Budapest, 1921; G. Kalmár and S. Varga, *Földrajz a gimnázium, reálgimnázium és reáliskola I. osztálya számára* Second edition, Budapest, 1926; F. Tóth, A leíró földrajz tanításának menete, *Magyar Tanítóképző* 39 (1926) 50; L. Bendefy-Benda, *A magyar föld szerkezete*, Pécs, 1932.

⁷¹ Zs. Aradi, *Öt éjszaka*, Budapest, 1936; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, *Egyetlen út*, 24.

⁷² A Magyar Királyi Földművelésügyi Minisztérium Vízrajzi Intézete, *A Kárpátmedence vízborította és árvízjárta területei*, https://map.mbfisz.gov.hu/terkepekamultbol/Mo_arviz_1938/ last accessed 15 November 2020.

⁷³ F. Zajti, *Magyar évezredek: skytha-hun-magyar faji azonosság*, Budapest, 1939, 11, 437; G. Kemény, *Verhovina feltámad: a ruszin sors könyve*, Budapest, 1939, 8.

⁷⁴ T. Mendöl, *A Felvidék*, Budapest, 1940; B. Bulla, *Erdély*, Budapest, 1943.

⁷⁵ S. Besenyő, A horvátországi magyarok száma, *Kárpátmedence* 2 (1942) 270–278.

⁷⁶ Gy. Prinz, *Magyarország földrajza*, Budapest, 1942, 15, 143.

⁷⁷ Gy. Bognár, A magyar világnézet kialakítása a liceumi magyar nyelv és irodalom tanítása útján, *Magyar Tanítóképző* 54 (1941) 179, 181.

⁷⁸ T. Baráth, *Az országépítés filozófiája a Kárpátmedencében*, Kolozsvár, 1943; Abrudbányai, Szántások új szántást, 86; L. Cs. Szabó, *Erdélyben*, Budapest, 1940; D. Simén, A mélység élettörvénye, *Keresztény Magvető* 74 (1942) 78.

⁷⁹ L. Soós, *A Kárpát-medence mollusca-faunája*, Budapest, 1943.

⁶³ Teleki, *The evolution of Hungary*, 14.

⁶⁴ Teleki, *The evolution of Hungary*, 33, 51–52.

⁶⁵ R. Keményfi, The mythical power of the dual river-system of the Carpathian Basin: the notion of a Hungarian Mesopotamia, *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 8 (2015) 165–184.

⁶⁶ Gyuris, Human geography, cartography, and statistics, 234.

⁶⁷ J. Cholnoky, *A Föld és élete* Volume 6, Budapest, 1937, 5.

⁶⁸ M. Antonsich and K. Szalkai, On Great Hungary and the importance of minor geopolitical traditions, *Political Geography* 39 (2014) A3.



Fig. 2. The front page of an interwar school atlas, on which a boy scout is watching the silhouette of Greater Hungary on the horizon. Source: K. Kogutowicz, *Dr. Kogutowicz Károly polgári iskolai atlasza*, Budapest, 1930.

coinciding with the foundation of the Hungarian state and the latter with the breakup of its historical territory. The map does not take into consideration that Hungary was not a sovereign state between 1541 and 1920, hence neglecting the consequent error of presenting the country's borders as over 900 years old (and thus as the longest existing ones in the region). But this map – as many others – was produced for a geopolitical agenda, namely to justify the unity of the Carpathian Basin.

The last major volume to emerge in this spirit before the subsequent silence on the topic (during early state socialism) was co-written by geomorphologist Béla Bulla and human geographer Tibor Mendöl. Work on this began during the war, and it is mentioned in the main text that the task is to analyse the 'Hungarian landscape' which overlaps with the territory of historical Hungary. At least to some degree reflecting on the immediate post-war realities, the likely later-added (or revised) preface argues that

'shared with other states, the Carpathian Basin is the smallest natural unit within the broad frames of which the territory of the Hungarian state fits en bloc'.⁸⁰

Although these works legitimised Hungary's geopolitical aims during the war, they played virtually no role following its end. With the 1947 Paris Peace Treaties, Hungary's borders were restored to the post-Trianon territory, with the exception of an additional loss of three villages south of Bratislava to Czechoslovakia.

Following the political changes of 1948–1949 most geographers in Hungary were labelled 'Hettnerists' and marginalised: during the next twenty years anything resembling regional geography could

⁸⁰ B. Bulla and T. Mendöl, *A Kárpát-medence földrajza*, Budapest, 1947, VI, 73; R. Györi, Tibor Mendöl 1905–1966, in: H. Lorimer and C.W.J. Withers (Eds), *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies*, London, 2009, 39–54.

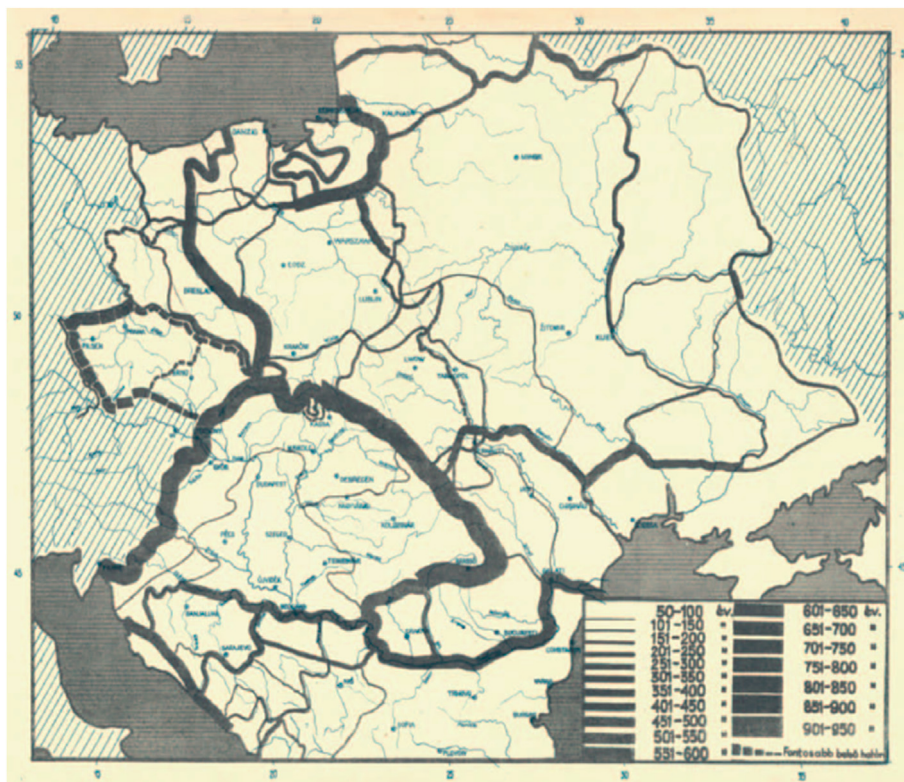


Fig. 3. The durability of state boundaries in Central Europe (1000–1920). Source: A. Rónai, *Közép-Európa atlasz*, Budapest and Balatonfüred, 1945.

only take the state's borders as a starting point.⁸¹ Yet from the late 1960s onwards, social aspects were again added to economic and environmental elements. Also, in the mid 1960s the Carpathian Basin reappeared in studies of history and historical cartography.⁸² It perhaps never went out of fashion in the natural sciences, including geophysics.⁸³ In earth sciences, even the label Hungarian Basin is repeatedly used in at least two articles.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Carpathian Basin remained present in émigré literature, including scholarly and less academically inclined publications.⁸⁵ Another way to track the trajectory of the Carpathian Basin is to search *The Hungarian Quarterly*, an English language multidisciplinary periodical issued in Hungary between 1936 and 2012.⁸⁶ The compound appeared here during 1937–1944, and although the journal ceased publication between 1945 and 1959, the Carpathian Basin very rarely came into view in the issues from 1960 to 1981. But the concept increasingly reappeared after that.

In human geography, where the Carpathian Basin has had a particularly loaded history, the term likewise experienced its comeback in the early 1980s, with a journal special section commemorating, and another study (published elsewhere) historically analysing, the works of interwar Hungarian geographers.⁸⁷ At the end of the decade Rónai published his memoirs, including details of his long collaboration with Teleki and their likewise long – if eventually unsuccessful – battle to justify the Carpathian Basin.⁸⁸ Finally, in the 1990s some of the above cited volumes were republished at a time when the notion was increasingly back on the political – though not geopolitical – agenda.⁸⁹ This was largely related to a growing interest in Hungary towards the fate of their ethnic kin in the neighbouring countries.

Counternarratives

Counter-discourses to the Carpathian Basin can be divided into two main groups; foreign and domestic. The latter did not necessarily question the idea and (partial) political reality of pre-WWI Hungary's unity, but nevertheless raised issues that mainstream Hungarian geography and politics would often neglect. As a result,

⁸¹ Hajdú, *Magyarország közigazgatási földrajza*, 77–78.

⁸² M. Kovács (Ed), *A könyv és könyvtár a magyar társadalom életében*, Budapest, 1963, 18–20; L. Imédy-Molnár, The earliest known map of Hungary, 1528, *Imago Mundi* 18 (1964) 59; F. Glatz, *Történetíró, jelenkor, interpretáció, Századok* 110 (1976) 198.

⁸³ Gy. Topál, A Kárpát-medence denevéreinek elterjedési adatai, *Ann. Hist.-Natur. Mus. Natl. Hung.* 5 (1954) 471–483; A. Ádám, Some results of the magnetotelluric survey in the Carpathian Basin and its complex interpretation, *Journal of Geomagnetism and Geoelectricity* 22 (1970) 223–233.

⁸⁴ L. Stegena, Lemeztektonika, Tethys és a Magyar-medence, *Földtani Közönlöny* 102 (1972) 280–300; T. Szalai, A Kárpátok szintézisével foglalkozó irodalom történeti áttekintése, *Földtani Közönlöny* 107 (1977) 296, 298.

⁸⁵ S. Török, *Településtörténeti tanulmányok és határproblémák a Kárpátmedencében*, Astor Park, 1973; S.B. Vardy, The impact of Trianon upon Hungary and the Hungarian mind: the nature of Hungarian interwar irredentism, *Hungarian Studies Review* 10 (1983) 34, 37.

⁸⁶ *The Hungarian Quarterly* (past journal), <https://www.eurozine.com/journals/the-hungarian-quarterly/> last accessed 16 November 2020.

⁸⁷ Hetvenöt éve született Mendöl Tibor földrajztudós, *Békési Élet* 15 (1980) 411–439; Z. Hajdú, Területrendezési törekvések a magyar földrajztudományban a két világháború között, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 106 (1982) 89–106.

⁸⁸ A. Rónai, *Térképezett történelem*, Budapest, 1989.

⁸⁹ A. Rónai, *Közép-Európa atlasz*, Budapest, 1993; B. Bulla and T. Mendöl, *A Kárpát-medence földrajza [The geography of the Carpathian Basin]*, Budapest, 1999; Z. Gyimesi, The contested post-socialist rehabilitation of the past: dual narratives in the republishing of Tibor Mendöl's *Introduction to Geography*, *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 7 (2014) 242–273; Z. Hajdú, The rebirth of the concept of the Carpathian Basin in Hungarian political language after 1988, in: J.P. Laine, I. Liikanen and J.W. Scott (Eds), *Post-Cold War borders: reframing political space in Eastern Europe*, Abingdon and New York, 2018, 207–227.

these ideas remained marginalised; yet the mere fact of their appearance makes them worth mentioning.

One of the best examples of the above is a tome by a Hungarian statistician and geographer, which despite extending over eleven hundred pages and including maps largely went unnoticed in Hungarian geography.⁹⁰ Yet the tome dealt with Hungary's demographic, ethnolinguistic, and religious diversity, which at the time of its publishing around the fin de siècle should have received much more attention. Relatedly, immediately after World War I there were at least two political ideas that differed from mainstream thoughts of Hungarian supremacy in a centrally governed Carpathian Basin. In the newly created position of Minister for National Minorities, Oszkár Jászi suggested introducing a Swiss-inspired democratic confederation of cantons largely based on ethnolinguistic groups.⁹¹ But such a proposal came too late and was rejected by especially Romania, and Jászi stepped down. The other idea was region-specific: Transylvanianism has been a political and cultural movement among both Hungarians and Romanians, promoting historical acknowledgement and peaceful multiethnic coexistence.⁹² But this too has remained relatively marginal.

Further, by the 1910s there were a few Hungarian geographers less inclined towards environmental determinism, such as Géza Czirbusz and Aurél Hézszer. The latter in particular found inspiration in contemporary French geography and translated Jean Brunhes' *Géographie humaine* in the early 1920s, which however never got published.⁹³ Had these scholars – especially Hézszer – become more noticed, perhaps Hungarian contemporary geography would have taken a different course: one less keen on environmental determinism and thus a stark belief in the unity of the Carpathian Basin characterised by Hungarian supremacy. Finally, around the end of World War II a few volumes were published that tried to present Hungary's position more sensitively and realistically, but these works similarly received less attention.⁹⁴

Another important point is that some of the foreign geographers whom their Hungarian colleagues referred to as subscribing to the unity of the Carpathian Basin (see above) were either selectively read, or drew conclusions elsewhere that do not support this idea. The latter is exemplified by the following excerpt from Reclus:

The ethnological boundaries of Rumania are far wider than are the political ones, for they embrace ... the greater portion of Transylvania, as well as extensive tracts in the Banat and Eastern Hungary. ... Rumania proper has an area of only 46,709 square miles, but the countries of the Rumanians occupy at least twice that extent ... The Roman [sic] territories ... almost encircle the mountain masses of the Eastern Carpathians, ...but only about one-half of this territory has been formed into an autonomous state ... If the national ambition of the Rumanians were to be realised, the natural centre of their country would not lie within the actual limits of the territory, but at Hermannstadt ... or elsewhere on the northern slope of the Carpathians.⁹⁵

When it comes to Ratzel, he indeed described Hungary as a low country encircled by the Carpathians, positioned as an island between them and the Alps. Yet he adds in the same paragraph that as the Carpathians evolved as a large branch of the Alps, with the latter gradually submerging into the Hungarian lowlands, this area gains a 'Carpathian Alpine character'.⁹⁶ Additionally, the rivers of the Eastern Alps are oriented towards the Danube rather than the Mediterranean. For Ratzel, these features constitute 'the organic link between the Alpine state Austria and Hungary', enabling the monarchy to be seen as a geographic unit despite the diversity of its orographic basic elements.

Regarding Kjellén, then, he indeed saw mountains as a natural boundary, and specifically mentions Romania as 'naturally entrenched along the Transylvanian mountains'. But he added that 'no one can say how high a mountain should be in order to serve as a good border. It depends to a large extent on the comfort of its passes'.⁹⁷ Brigham specifically counts the Carpathians among mountain ranges that 'fall far short of supplying high fences'.⁹⁸ For Kjellén, then, a sea is the best natural demarcation, and consequently an insular country is the most ideal. On Hungary, Kjellén noted that it hosts Romanian and Serbian minorities which are subjects of a policy of Magyarisation 'in order to enforce national unity'.⁹⁹ The latter process was also mentioned by Hettner: 'even though the Magyars – living in the central part of the country – only made up about half of Hungary's population, they were in command and repressed the other nationalities' in the peripheries.¹⁰⁰ Such observations would of course never be cited by contemporary Hungarian geographers.

But the most ardent counternarratives to the Carpathian Basin unsurprisingly emerged in Hungary's neighbouring countries, and – similarly to the Hungarian discourses – included homegrown and exogenous ideas alike (or often, a mixture of these). Reflecting the fashion of the times, some of these arguments were even based on similar principles as in Hungary, but of course reaching completely different conclusions.

Romanian geography, which emerged following World War I to help shape the just evolving Greater Romania, could draw on an influential long-time ally in the person of Emmanuel de Martonne. He stressed that Wallachia was 'a Romanian region', an integral unity of mountains, hills and lowlands, and saw due to its similar character Transylvania as the Romanian region 'par excellence'.¹⁰¹ Obsessed as he was with the ideal geometric shape of countries, de Martonne claimed that through modifying borders the pre-World War I Romanian 'set square' would be replaced by a 'round and perfect' form. In addition, he stressed the great economic complementarity of the post-war Romanian regions. The interwar Romanian geopolitical school also drew heavily on Ratzel, Kjellén, Haushofer, and Walther Vogel.¹⁰² Indeed, during World War I Kjellén discussed the ideal shape of states and argued that 'a concentric figure is the most suitable as it best serves cohesion around a central point'.¹⁰³ Thus Kjellén explains Romania's longing for Transylvania, which it surrounds like a pincers. Moreover, a

⁹⁰ P. Balogh, *A népfajok Magyarországon*, Budapest, 1902; Hajdú, A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület, 397.

⁹¹ Gy. Litván, *A twentieth-century prophet: Oscar Jászi 1875–1957*, Budapest, 2006, 155–159.

⁹² I.K. Nagy, Transylvanianism as identity discourse, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* 6 (2014) 317–333.

⁹³ Fodor, *A magyar földrajztudomány története*, 264–265, 611–612.

⁹⁴ L. Jócsik, *A Közép-Dunamedence közigazgatása*, Budapest, 1944; E. Radics (Ed), *A Dunatáj* Volumes 1–3, Budapest, 1946; D. Elekes (Ed), *A mai Magyarország*, Budapest, 1946.

⁹⁵ É. Reclus, *The Earth and its inhabitants: Europe* Volume 1, New York, 1883, 155–156.

⁹⁶ Ratzel, *Politische Geographie*, 655, 662.

⁹⁷ R. Kjellén, *Staten som liksform*, Stockholm, 1916, 54–55.

⁹⁸ A.P. Brigham, Principles in the determination of boundaries, *Geographical Review* 7 (1919) 23.

⁹⁹ Kjellén, *Staten som liksform*, 82, 106–107.

¹⁰⁰ Hettner, *Grundzüge der Länderkunde*, 260.

¹⁰¹ Gyuris, *Human geography, cartography, and statistics*, 223–224, 227.

¹⁰² G. Bowd and D. Clayton, Emmanuel de Martonne and the wartime defence of Greater Romania: circle, set square and spine, *Journal of Historical Geography* 47 (2015) 59.

¹⁰³ Kjellén, *Staten som liksform*, 68–69.

similar discourse as in Hungary appeared about Romania serving 'as a military and civilizational bulwark against the Russian East'.¹⁰⁴ But vastly different from Hungary was Romanian geopolitics' focus on the ethnic factor, to counterpoise the 'harmony of the Hungarian state's fictive geography'. Perhaps most importantly, instead of natural frontiers the Carpathians came to be seen as 'the heart of the Romanian land and state', epitomised by labels such as 'the spine of Romania' and 'the citadel of the Rumanians'.¹⁰⁵ The central role these mountains were granted to Romanianness could later be evidenced by the self-label 'genius of the Carpathians' of Nicolae Ceauşescu, the country's late communist-nationalist dictator.

Somewhat similarly, interwar Czechoslovak geography also put the Carpathians and the mountains surrounding Czechia in the centre of the new state's identity. Besides determinism Vladimír Korčák drew on French geography when introducing the notion of 'tribal area', which is one with a very long continuity of human settlement by a distinctive ethnic group.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the Great Hungarian Plain was for long a passage repeatedly invaded by Asian nomads, thus failing to develop sedentary life and European urban culture. On this basis Korčák argued that the basin is not a natural geographic unit.

In the formation of Yugoslav geography, Jovan Cvijić was the key person. At least at the start of World War I he only partly questioned the Carpathian Basin as a geographical entity, but called it Pannonian Basin, which he described thus: 'the Pannonian Plain morphologically belongs to the Pannonian Basin, but its southern part is, in terms of transportation and geographically, economically and ethnographically intimately linked to the Dinaric lands.'¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, the Pannonian Plain could also be claimed for the Yugoslav state, also on ethnic grounds. In addition, Cvijić also had French contacts that were also important in legitimising the new state. One of them, Émile Haumant, found that despite the physical and cultural diversity of Yugoslavia, there are valleys that overflow one into the other. Finally, already during the interwar era Slovene geographer Anton Melik was reacting to Hungarian irredentism by deconstructing the naturalness of the Pannonian Basin.

The narratives briefly outlined above are of course as one-sided and biased as the ones portraying the Carpathian Basin as an unquestionably cohesive political geographical entity. What is interesting is the high degree to which the works of geographers of various national affiliations were aligned with the current interests of their respective countries. As noted above, various French geographers for instance were legitimising one or the other new-born state in East Central Europe. As a sort of synthesis, in the mid 1930s Jacques Ancel uncritically embraced the dominant national geographic imaginaries of especially Romania, but also Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, while portraying Hungary, Germany and Austria in a highly negative light.¹⁰⁸ Contemporary receptions of Ancel's tome are similarly tendentious, including a very critical Hungarian review and an American one that describes it as promising to be a 'standard work'.¹⁰⁹ From a critical geopolitical

perspective, all this points to the complicity of mainstream geographers to international conflicts.

Conclusions

The concept of the Carpathian Basin and its antecedents are closely related to the long historical process of Hungary's (self-) recognition and (self-)definition. Many scientific fields were involved in this but geography's role stands out in imagining, legitimising, and following World War I contesting, the country's territorial extension. In such works foreign sources also played an important role, although these were sometimes selectively cited in order to suit the national agenda. The geographical arguments in favour of preserving or recreating Hungary's pre-World War I territory drew heavily on environmental determinism, but also regionalism, economic interdependency, and history.

Although the strong impact of German geography in Hungary is evident up to the interwar era (by which it was less influential elsewhere), it remains an open question whether Hungarian mainstream geographers were indeed helplessly impregnated with environmental determinism, or if they intensely relied on such ideas because these were believed to fit Hungary's geopolitical goals. More certain is that the disciplinary unity of human geography and earth sciences that long characterised geography facilitated the frequent transfer of ideas between the two. At least by the 1910s alternative approaches – such as possibilism – also appeared in Hungarian geography, though they remained rather marginal. Foreign counternarratives to the Carpathian Basin drew somewhat less on environmental determinism – and were thus more in line with contemporary international geography – though perhaps for pragmatic reasons rather than out of theoretical convictions. As Hungarian geography was particularly influential on Hungary's policymakers following World War I, Hajdú rightly raises the question whether the former's determinist parochialism contributed to the country's inability to alter its strategic course amongst the changing circumstances.¹¹⁰ It should be added that in the 1920s Hungarian geographers were rather isolated, given for instance their (as well as German and Austrian colleagues') exclusion from the meetings of the International Geographical Union.¹¹¹

In addition to conceptual bias, geographers and others in Hungary were late to recognise the potential threat to the country's territorial integrity. As shown, the few works that appeared before World War I on Hungary's ethnic diversity – however detailed – were largely ignored. Further, Fodor lamented the lack of sufficient attention paid to the Carpathians by pre-World War I Hungarian geography, which he argued was too preoccupied with various subregions in the centre of the country and explorations of territories as far away as the Arctic.¹¹² Beyond these aspects, personal career trajectories also played a role in the evolution of Hungarian geographical thought. In fact Prinz, Cholnoky, Lóczy, and Fodor all lived and worked in territories annexed from Hungary following World War I, and had to leave their institutions behind to continue their career in what remained of Hungary (in addition much of Teleki's property remained in Transylvania).¹¹³

This study confirms at least two general insights from critical geopolitics. One is that geopolitical discourses typically emerge in times of major changes and crises. In Hungary, the following are good examples of periods when a need to cherish the country's

¹⁰⁴ C. Cotoi, The geopolitical turn in interwar Romanian sociology and geography: from social reform to population exchange plans, *History of the Human Sciences* 32:2 (2019) 84–86.

¹⁰⁵ Bowd and Clayton, 53–60.

¹⁰⁶ P. Drulák, Between geopolitics and anti-geopolitics: Czech political thought, *Geopolitics* 11 (2006) 430–431.

¹⁰⁷ V. Duančić, Nationalist geographies in interwar Yugoslavia: manoeuvring between national and transnational spaces, *European Review of History* 25 (2018) 593–596.

¹⁰⁸ J. Ancel, *Manuel géographique de politique européenne* Volume 1, Paris, 1936.

¹⁰⁹ A. Pécsi, Jacques Ancel: Az európai politika földrajzi kézikönyve, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 64 (1936) 173–175; W.L. Langer, Manuel géographique de politique européenne, *Foreign Affairs* 14:4 (1936) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/1936-07-01/manuel-geographique-de-politique-europeenne>.

¹¹⁰ Hajdú, A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület, 404.

¹¹¹ A. Réthly, Főtitkári jelentés a Magyar Földrajzi Társaság 60-ik évi (1931/32) működéséről, *Földrajzi Közlemények* 60 (1932) 55.

¹¹² Fodor, *A magyar földrajztudomány története*, 161, 204.

¹¹³ Hajdú, Trianon és a magyar földrajztudomány, 24.

historical shape was felt and supported by the gradually emerging notion of a unitary Carpathian Basin: following the Battle of Mohács, around the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, and during and between the two world wars. Moreover, similarly to several other European countries the aftermath of World War I is seen to have given rise to not just geopolitics but modern Hungarian geography more generally.¹¹⁴

The other insight is that foreign and domestic policies are almost always intertwined. In Yugoslavia for instance, interwar geopolitical discourses were not just employed to legitimise the geobody of the new-born state, but also to overshadow its prevalent internal fragmentation.¹¹⁵ In Romania, the geopolitical school of the early 1920s formulated progressive social reform plans but turned towards World War II into an excluding, ethnocentric biopolitical project.¹¹⁶ Regarding interwar Hungary, writing in the late

1940s Fodor praised Teleki for turning geography into a 'state governing tool'.¹¹⁷ Illustratively, when in 1938 Teleki's students organised what became a well frequented public exhibition on socioeconomic inequities fed by the Hungarian system of latifundia, he closed it prematurely.¹¹⁸ Rather than debating such issues, much of society was geared towards one ultimate goal: the resurrection of the Carpathian Basin.

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¹¹⁴ D. Clayton and T.J. Barnes, Continental European geographers and World War II, *Journal of Historical Geography* 47 (2015) 11–15; Cotoi, The geopolitical turn in interwar Romanian sociology, 85; Hajdú, A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület, 403.

¹¹⁵ Duancić, Nationalist geographies in interwar Yugoslavia, 588–590.

¹¹⁶ Cotoi, The geopolitical turn in interwar Romanian sociology, 76–94.

¹¹⁷ Fodor, *A magyar földrajztudomány története*, 260.

¹¹⁸ Rónai, *Térképezett történelem*, 115; Hajdú, A Kárpát-medence és a magyar államterület, 410.