

Histoire de la nation hongroise: Des premiers Magyars à Viktor Orbán. By Catherine Horel.

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Catherine Horel's book represents the most radical attempt on record to reorganize components of a 'standard' national history of Hungary, yielding a highly conceptual and novel synthesis. The experiment was conducted—one would assume—in order to escape the drabness of a bird's eye narrative that had been told one too many times, but also to make an important point about this history. Horel, who is a leading expert on Central European, especially Habsburg and post-Habsburg intellectual, social, and cultural history while also the author of a well-regarded monograph on Miklós Horthy, is certainly the right person to attempt such a reconstruction of Hungary's 'national story'. Commanding a vast reservoir of knowledge about the country and the broader contexts of its history, she skillfully connects chronologically distant events and processes in the non-linear narratives that make up her book. The emerging image is not only unusual and far from boring—it is genuinely insightful: documenting the anxieties and obsessions of modern elites with nationhood, territory, and sovereignty, Horel succeeds in making a convincing case about how to interpret the dilemmas of belated modernization and nation-building, fragmented, non-sovereign experiences of statehood, and pervasive intercommunal conflicts that frame the past of not only Hungarians, but those of most East Central European peoples, as well.

The insecurities that plague the nation-building efforts of Hungarian elites in the modern period have historical antecedents. As a prelude of what is to come, Horel offers an observation early on in her book about three uncertain, pliable relationships across the centuries that—unlike in Western European states—failed to achieve stable, institutionalized forms (p. 10). Uncertainty about territory (where do our lands end? how secure are we in their possession?), about the state-nation nexus (whose state is it? that of a dynasty, an ethnically defined nation, or a political community or that of several political communities?), and even about the boundaries of

the political, communal self (what is the Hungarian nation after all?) emerge early and refuse to go away as history only seems to further complicate these ambiguous categories and relationships.

Following the shortest (yet still informative) summary of Hungarian history ever read by this reviewer (only sixteen pages: pp. 19–35), Horel embarks on a thorough questioning of her three major ‘nodes’, where different centuries and representations intersect, each yielding a conundrum that contributes to fears and uncertainties about the national state, that curious object of desire that modern elites have set themselves as a goal. Territory is perhaps the most conventional and comes first in the survey. The inability to firmly control, retain, and populate ‘national territory’ feeds anxieties that become especially pronounced from the nineteenth century onward, but have their roots in medieval and early modern fiascos of state-building. The mythical moment of claiming territory during the Conquest of the late ninth century haunts national imaginaries and helps the reader understand the dynamics that have contributed, *inter alia*, to cementing the standing of such leaders as Miklós Horthy, who, appearing as a consolidator of national territory built his myth on leading the nation from a collapse and the accompanying loss of territory to the gradual aggrandizement of Hungary (pp. 49–52).

Horel correctly observes that language and territory are intimately linked: only areas where Hungarian is predominantly spoken can really be considered Hungarian territory, and only once Hungarian is elevated to the same rank as other ‘civilized’ languages can the speakers of Hungarian rightfully claim their place amongst fellow Europeans. The latter dimension is accomplished in the course of the nineteenth century, but the former remains a failure, which, for Hungarian nationalism, has since represented a problematic experience intimately tied in with the experience of losing two thirds of the kingdom’s territory in the wake of World War I. During the crisis-ridden years of 1918–1920, the elites of the other nations co-inhabiting the realm opted for joining their kin-states built on the ruins of the Habsburg lands, and gaining the blessing of the victorious powers at the Paris peace conference to do so. Horel skillfully demonstrates how territory remains, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a dual concept for Hungarian nationalism: always looking to expand, elites are also fearful of losing what they control, and nowhere is this simultaneous ambition and fear as clearly represented as in the case of gaining access to the sea at Fiume (Rijeka) and the re-integration of Transylvania into Hungary—with both dimensions of territorial ambition destroyed in 1918–1920. The book makes it clear that these defeats were not without antecedent: the hold of Hungarian elites over these territories had remained ever tenuous—even if they were loath to admit it, ever since the defeat at the hand of the Ottomans destroyed the medieval kingdom of Hungary in 1526.

Historical setbacks and fears explain the significance of state-building as a recurring concern of Hungarian elites across the centuries. A durable and strong state controlling its territory was one of the vanishing points of the efforts of national leaders, who at the same time were faced with the challenge of Habsburg domination. A strong(er) state was an available option on the political horizon, yet fully embracing it would have eliminated the sovereignty of Hungary not just in practice, but also in theory. Anti-Habsburg revolts and periods of cooperation define the early modern and modern era, until in 1867 the state-building, nationalizing elites succeeded in gaining acceptable terms: a kingdom within the empire of the Habsburgs, but with far-reaching autonomy (pp. 160–63). As is well known, the Compromise of 1867 failed to save, in the long term, both the empire and the Kingdom of Hungary nested in it, and the twentieth century was to be defined by various imperial centers exercising various amounts of—but always considerable—influence over the small state that emerged after the Treaty of Trianon.

Horel's contribution is considerable. As much as the shifts of territory and the accompanying frustrations of East Central European national elites have been discussed in the existing literature, the complex elite mentalities informed by these experiences of national expansion and implosion remain both under-researched and underrepresented. This book goes a long way to remedy this state of affairs, as Horel explains how territory is tied in with the ambiguous historical experiences concerning the struggle for sovereignty and how the lack of long-term historical experience of independence creates political reflexes and public attitudes that view outside (great power) influence as an ever-present threat to the nation, explaining, at least in part, the sovereigntist policies one sees periodically re-emerge in Hungarian history—the current governments of Viktor Orbán included (pp. 164–67, 194–98).

For this reviewer at least, the third major unit of the book, on the Hungarian 'Pantheon' proved the most fascinating. Having demonstrated the importance of territory and sovereignty, as well as the anxieties linked to these concepts in the thinking of Hungarian elites, Horel holds what seems like a master key to unlocking the logic of memorialization in Hungarian history. Personalities navigate these recurring challenges, face similar anxieties, and are distinguished first and foremost by the kinds of responses they offer to the question of how to regain the (imagined) paradise lost of powerful and independent medieval Hungary. The pre-modern Hungarian pantheon is accordingly populated by powerful kings—but a dis-identity is inscribed into the succession of the crowned heads when the Habsburgs inherit the throne. The unresolved standing of the longest ruling dynasty in Hungarian history itself attests to the dilemmas faced by memory entrepreneurs and politicians alike: what are we to make of these rulers who oppress and protect, integrate but also safeguard Hungary—sometimes all at the same time. Candidates hailing from more

recent centuries for the national pantheon were themselves often bitter rivals due to their differing attitudes to the dynasty. What to make of rebels who allied with the Ottoman Turks against the Habsburgs? Was István Széchenyi right in his insistence on promoting the development of the country while remaining loyal to the dynasty, or was the ever more anti-Habsburg Lajos Kossuth the national leader who deserves pride of place? Horel highlights how these dilemmas not only remain unresolved in the Hungarian historical consciousness but are compounded by the superimposed stories of other revolutionaries—first and foremost Imre Nagy, the executed reform communist premier of the country during the 1956 revolution (p. 196).

Ultimately, however, as Horel correctly observes, the sovereignty-deficient history of the country calls for a culture of remembrance organized around resistance and periods of growth and prosperity. The latter are reflected by the built heritage of Budapest especially, while the former feeds into a cult of sovereignty that informs even current distrust towards supranational (and post-Westphalian) politics in some sections of society and much of the Hungarian political right.

Horel's expertise shines through in many places in this book, but perhaps nowhere else as clearly as in her dissection of the memory struggles of the new millennium. She highlights how this memory culture is all too often and all too easily mistaken for 'regular' right-wing radicalism on a collision course with the emergent Western canon of transnational memory organized around the memorialization of the Shoa. Frictions abound, as Hungary's current political and cultural leaders do in fact seek to construct a national community of victims of foreign (German, Soviet, etc.) interventions in the twentieth century. Jews and non-Jews are often placed on an equal footing in this victim community. This is, however, not a simple expression of anti-Semitic reflexes, instead it is best interpreted as another reflection of the insistence on seeing Hungarian history as a continuous struggle for sovereignty and the tragic consequences of foreign domination. In Horel's assessment, this anomaly can also be understood by reconstructing this history which, in the mode of mythology, involves both the temporal present and a past which, due to persistent anxieties and traumas, is still a lived, felt presence in society (pp. 325–29).

As the above review intended to suggest, Catherine Horel's synthesis of Hungarian history succeeds in offering a historical entry point to understanding Hungary and Hungarians, without either turning this history into a heroic narrative or a story about a backward political community clinging to its tribal idols. Given its focus, it is not a total history of a country and a national community—such an enterprise would likely prove impossible anyhow. Instead, it offers a convincing, productive, and intellectually engaging approach to the complexities of dealing with the past. Where there are gaps, these gaps are the necessary consequences of the chosen perspective. One will need to consult other sources for more detailed accounts of social

history: medieval serfs and industrial workers of modernity appear less frequently than they would in such an alternative synthesis. But where Horel's focus falls she does not fail to convince: as far as laying out the dynamics of elite mentalities, histories of representations, and political imaginaries, her work is a lasting contribution which due to its nuanced analysis will serve and inspire experts as well. Factual errors are almost absent. This reviewer could really only disagree with some of the miscellanea about the nationalizing policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—as in the case of the 1879 legislation on schools and the teaching of Hungarian—which did not make Hungarian the only language of education in primary institutions (p. 76). The myriad personalities, their actions, institutions of state- and nation-building, of representation and remembrance are referenced correctly and with attention to detail. This reliability, coupled with a strong conceptual focus, make this *Histoire de la nation hongroise* [History of the Hungarian Nation] into a book that is as important as it is enlightening, often forcing the reader to turn the page and keep on reading, taken by the sovereign (!) force of the author's exemplary academic, yet flowing prose.

