

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Géza Pálffy. *Hungary between Two Empires 1526–1711*.

Translated by David Robert Evans. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021. 248 pages. ISBN 978-0-2530-5463-0.

This important volume introduces English readers to one of the most critical periods of Central European history when “Hungary became the periphery and battleground of two empires, the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy” (1). The volume’s author, Géza Pálffy, is research professor at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute of History and has written numerous groundbreaking studies on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of these studies, such as the masterful *The Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy in the Sixteenth Century*, are available in English translation.<sup>1</sup> Pálffy’s *Hungary between Two Empires* presents a synthesis of his scholarly expertise as well as a thoughtful assessment of the current state of research on early modern Hungary. Pálffy dispels several standard interpretations that have impaired previous Hungarian historical scholarship, which is one of the volume’s great strengths.

The book is intended to appeal to a wide readership, ranging from university students to experienced scholars. It is written in very readable prose, thanks in part to an excellent translation by David Robert Evans; it is lucidly organized, and generously illustrated with forty-seven images (engravings, etchings, woodcuts, and paintings) from the Hungarian National Museum and the National Széchényi Library. Many of these images have not been seen before in English-language publications; the quality of the reproduction, for which special commendation goes to the publisher, is astounding (especially an image of the fortress city of Győr [fig. 15] and a portrait of

Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa [fig. 26]). The book includes fifteen maps that provide valuable insights into shifting borders and military campaigns, as well as commercial and administrative developments. The author has also added a number of helpful tables and indices: a glossary of important terms (241–46); a list of rulers and highest dignitaries (e.g., palatines and chief justices, 247–51); a chronology of political and military events (xxiii–xxx); an index of names and nationalities; and a place index. The remarkable richness of this volume ensures its place as a standard reference work.

The book is subdivided into two parts. Part 1, entitled “Hungary after Mohács: A Century of Direction-Seeking, 1526–1606,” explores the peculiar position of Hungary as a borderland between two empires. The focus is on institutional, economic, religious, and cultural consolidation and growth enabled by the Ottoman-Habsburg peace treaty of 1547. Part 2, entitled “Decay and Rejuvenation: The Janus-Faced Seventeenth Century, 1606–1711,” looks at the aftermath of the Long Turkish War (1591–1606) when Hungary was ravaged by military invasions and civil war. But in the middle of all the devastation and upheaval, Pálffy finds remarkable renewal, including the reinvigoration of noble politics, the revival of the Catholic Church, and the development of Hungarian language and literature.

The book’s scope is ambitious, both chronologically and thematically. Yet, Pálffy keeps the reader’s attention with masterful critiques of conventional historical wisdom enhanced by evidence from the archives. For example, he rejects the traditional assumption that the Ottoman seizure of large parts of medieval Hungary led to economic and demographic catastrophes. In fact, the Hungarian economy benefited from cross-border trade between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. Among the beneficiaries were frontier soldiers, who supplemented their incomes by way of livestock trade, as well as ambitious individuals, like Sebestyén Thököly (the forebear of the magnate Imre Thököly), who mobilized his connections in Ottoman Hungary to become one of Royal Hungary’s richest entrepreneurs. Pálffy also argues, contrary to previous historians’ claims, that Hungary’s population did not decline during this period. Drawing on Hungarian and Ottoman tax records, he demonstrates that the population actually increased, from ca. 3.3 million before the Battle of Mohács (1526) to 3.8–4.0 million by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Hungary’s ethnic composition changed, however, due to the massive in-migration of South Slavs (Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians). This was “one of the longest-lasting consequences of the Ottoman occupation of Hungary” (194).

In my opinion, Pálffy's most original contribution lies in his dismantling of age-old mythologies about the so-called Hungarian independence movements associated with historical figures such as István Bocskai, Imre Thököly, and Ferenc II Rákóczi. The Bocskai uprising (1604–6), for example, had very little chance of unifying Hungary: only a minority of the Hungarian elite supported Bocskai. He drew much of his strength from an alliance with the Ottomans. The Bocskai uprising resulted in a vicious civil war that ultimately benefited Hajduk soldiers and Protestant nobles, who were able to extract privileges from the Habsburg court (e.g., tax exemptions, jurisdictional privileges, and the free practice of religion). Even the Rákóczi uprising (1703–11), which Pálffy agrees came closest to establishing an independent Hungarian state, should not be idealized. Rákóczi had many Hungarian opponents: significant portions of the nobility, major cities (e.g., Pozsony [Pressburg, Bratislava] and Sopron [Ödenburg]), and important border fortresses failed to join the uprising. Again, a civil war broke out that left much of Hungary “barren, deserted and uncultivated” (239). Interestingly, Pálffy cites new scholarly discoveries that show how Rákóczi, like his predecessors Bocskai and Thököly, ultimately turned to the Ottomans for support.

The book's emphasis, however, is not on Hungarians' relations with the Ottomans but rather on Royal Hungary's political and institutional integration into the Habsburg Monarchy. Pálffy highlights, for example, that significant members of the Hungarian political elite “effectively adapt[ed] to the Habsburg court in Vienna” (34). They used their Viennese connections to procure the highest military and political offices (e.g., captain-generals, palatines [viceroys], and chief justices), and they shared political power with their counterparts in the emerging Habsburg central administration. This system of joint governance was particularly evident in the elaborate and costly border defense system, which turned Hungary into “the bastion of Central Europe” (38). According to Pálffy, the close relationship with Vienna explains why Royal Hungary—unlike Bohemia and the Austrian hereditary lands—could maintain much of its state sovereignty; given the Ottoman military threat, Pálffy sees there to have been no other realistic option for “Hungary's survival” (31) and “for the Hungarian people to remain within European civilization” (35).

Overall, Pálffy remains rather skeptical of Hungarian efforts to enlist the Ottomans as allies. For example, he perceives King John Szapolyai's quest for an independent Hungarian kingdom under Ottoman protection

as misguided. Szapolyai was merely “a Hungarian stooge” (44) who needed to support Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–66; represented in fig. 3) in his campaigns against the Habsburgs. Similarly, the Hungarian magnates who participated in the so-called Ferenc Wesselényi Conspiracy (1666–70) were in the grip of an illusion. Like Szapolyai, they did not understand that the Ottomans would never allow the existence of an independent Hungarian state. This also applies to Imre Thököly, who “seemed not to have even the smallest amount of good sense” because he joined the Ottoman 1683 campaign against Vienna and remained the Porte’s ally even when “the liberation of Hungary began” (164). All told, Pálffy’s account reflects the ambiguous state of Hungarian scholarship on “the Turkish orientation” (László Benczédi) in Hungarian history.<sup>2</sup> However, much more research is needed to understand the motivations of Turcophile Hungarians.

Although Pálffy focuses on Hungarian-Habsburg relations, he gives short shrift to the Habsburgs’ oppressive interventions in Hungary. For example, in 1670 the Vienna court inflicted brutal reprisals to put down a major revolt in Upper Hungary (the thirteen easternmost counties of the Hungarian kingdom). These reprisals included the mass arrest of nobles, confiscation of their estates, exorbitant war taxes, additional exactions by billeted imperial troops, and the violent imposition of the Counter-Reformation. Pálffy says very little about these developments, which, I believe, convinced a considerable number of Hungarians that the Ottomans were more benevolent rulers than the Habsburgs.<sup>3</sup> Pálffy is entirely correct in observing that Upper Hungary “became a burning hotbed of strife for a prolonged time” (151). In fact, this region became the epicenter of a series of anti-Habsburg revolts that drew on significant popular support and ended only with the collapse of the Ferenc II Rákóczi uprising in 1711. One wonders to what extent Hungary’s “close-knit relationship” (225) with the Habsburg Monarchy unraveled during the last decades of the seventeenth century. Pálffy recognizes that Habsburg policies increasingly “evoked ever-greater dissatisfaction and nationwide indignation” (226). He concedes that “Hungary’s long-awaited liberation [from the Ottoman yoke] came at a high price” (223).

Pálffy has written a masterpiece that goes well beyond introductory accounts so common in English-language academic publishing. The author provides both a window on the fascinating complexities of early modern Hungarian history as well as a refreshing reevaluation of traditional Hungarian historiography. In a more general sense, anyone interested in

Central and Eastern Europe will appreciate how Pálffy illustrates the richness of Hungarian political, demographic, economic, and cultural developments. The book will benefit specialists, students, and general readers interested in the history of Hungary, its relationships with the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, and Hungary's place in early modern Europe. Students and scholars alike are well advised to put Pálffy's volume on their reading lists.

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<https://doi.org/10.5325/hungarianstud.49.1.0106>

#### NOTES

1. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
2. See László Benczédi, "A török orientáció a XVII. század végi magyar politikában" [The Turkish orientation in late seventeenth-century Hungarian politics], in *A török orientáció a XVII. századi magyar politikában: Tudományos emlékülés 1983. március 25–26* [The Turkish orientation in seventeenth-century politics: scientific commemorative conference, March 25–26, 1983], ed. Péter Németh, László Iklódi, and Péter Hársfalvi (Vaja, Hungary: Nyírségi Nyomda, 1985), 21–34.
3. Georg B. Michels, *Habsburg Empire under Siege: Ottoman Expansion and Hungarian Revolt in the Age of Grand Vizier Ahmed Köprülü (1661–76)* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

### Georg B. Michels. *The Habsburg Empire under Siege: Ottoman Expansion and Hungarian Revolt in the Age of Grand Vizier Ahmed Köprülü (1661–76)*.

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 608 pages. ISBN 978-0-2280-0575-9.

One of the most popular Hungarian novels is set in the first half of the sixteenth century. A little boy and girl are kidnapped by a one-eyed Turk, and while they are escaping, the boy's mother is killed during a Turkish raid back in their village. The boy soon finds himself at the court of one of the most powerful Hungarian lords, when Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent captures the ancient Hungarian capital of Buda in 1541. The girl becomes a lady-in-waiting to Queen Isabella, who is forced into Transylvania. As the Kingdom of Hungary is being divided into three parts, the boy, the girl, and