

# Interpreting Luck and Heroes in Hungarian History.

Review on Hahner, Péter: *The Luck of Hungary*. (Magyarország szerencséje. Animus, Budapest, 2019.)

**Péter Illik**

*Institute of Hungarian Research, Budapest*

The 300-page-long book of Péter Hahner was published in hard-cover edition and it follows the best traditions of Anglo-Saxon synthesizing monographs on history as it uses a limited number of primary sources but cites a massive amount up-to-date secondary sources. Apart from the Hungarian traditions of historical monographs, it uses intertextual notes. The only formal shortcoming is that the first paragraphs under the subheads are also indented.

The idea of being betrayed and left behind (and discussions about it) is an integral part of the Hungarian collective historical consciousness. The key elements of this thought are the defeat at Mohács (1526), the idea of Hungary being the lonely defender of Europe, the continuous wars (of independence) waged against oppressive foreign powers like the Mongols, Ottomans, the Habsburgs or the USSR. These thoughts are supported by some key elements of the past e.g. the Mongol invasion, the Ottoman conquest, the Habsburg-Hungarian conflicts, the Trianon dictate, the revolutions and fights for independence in 1848–1849 and 1956, etc.

The other serious rupture in the Hungarian historical thinking related specifically to the Hungarian early modern age is the evaluation of the Habsburg rule. Its basic paradox is, that the Hungarian king was a Habsburg ruler as well which often caused conflicts between Hungarian and Habsburg imperial interests which heavily burdened the Habsburg–Hungarian cooperation. From 1526, there are two poles of this evaluation: the so-called “kuruc”, anti-Habsburgian, national, pro-independence approach and the so-called “labanc”, pro-Habsburgian aspect. These are umbrella terms, there are transitions between the two poles and often they are not self-definitions, but labels used by historians on each other. This narrative rupture is as old as the Habsburg–Hungarian cooperation and it shows some correlation with religious divisions as well. In the 16th century, mostly Hungarian Calvinists represented the anti-Habsburgian approach being offended by the catholic Habsburg court in their religious

freedom. Although for example the firmly pro-Habsburgian politician and catholic palatine of Hungary Miklós Esterházy (1625–1645) also criticized the Habsburg court.<sup>1</sup> In the Hungarian historiography, the two approaches manifest in debates about the evaluation of processes,<sup>2</sup> events or the role of Hungarian politicians like János Szapolyai, István Bocskai, Gábor Bethlen, Imre Thököly etc.<sup>3</sup> In the 19th century, the Roman Catholic priest and member of the MTA (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) Sándor Takáts was one of the most famous representative of the anti-Habsburgian approach which signs the separation of this approach from the religious orientation as well.<sup>4</sup> Although, his narrative highlighted that the anti-Habsburgian approach could intertwine with an Ottoman friendly narrative, as he evaluated the Ottoman rule more positively than the Habsburg one. Analysing the Hungarian historiography on the 16th and 17th centuries, Sándor Óze describes three modern scientific narrative models: the 19th-century patriotic, the “national-communist” (invented by Aladár Mód and Erik Molnár) and the globalist one.<sup>5</sup> By the 21st century, the above mentioned and shortly described narrative division was absorbed by the general public as well.<sup>6</sup>

The reflection on the outlined two narratives (such as the idea of being betrayed and the pro- and anti-Habsburgian evaluations) is important because they are in the background of historical works on Hungarian early modern history. Hahner reflects on the first one, as he does not condemn the thought of being betrayed by the West but makes an attempt to prove that the early modern history of Hungary was affected by positive and lucky external conditions. However, he does not reflect on the second narrative rupture therefore the readers have to read behind the lines themselves.

It is important to see the above-mentioned divisions in Hungarian narratives. According to postmodern theories when historians attempt to make a model of the objective past, they create a subjective narrative into which their present, their personalities and cognitive models also interfere.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the book of Hahner speaks about the past at least as much as about his thinking, the actual political context of his era and about his position in Hungarian scientific policy as well.

Conclusively, this review is not only a critique but a multi-level analysis of the thought-provoking book of Hahner, its theoretical background and the not-reflected layers of Hungarian narrative ruptures as well.

The introduction of the book reveals some of the author’s latent and contradictive premises on the Hungarian early modern age. He writes that after the tripartition of Hungary (its symbolic date is 1541) the royal Hungarian estates could use the anti-Habsburg

1 See in details: Péter 1985.

2 See in details: Illik 2016a.

3 See in details: Illik 2011.

4 See in details: Tarkó 2008; Cziike 2008.

5 See in detail: Óze 2009.

6 See in detail: Illik 2016b.

7 See in detail: Illik 2018; Illik 2019.

campaigns of the Transylvanian princes for their favour to protect their religious freedom and their privileges. However, it had a high price as they lost the trust of the Habsburg court.<sup>8</sup> Hahner uses the traditional term royal Hungary (“királyi Magyarország”) instead of the modern one, Kingdom of Hungary. (“Magyar Királyság”). The former originates from the 19th-century patriotic historiography, it is connected to the anti-Habsburgian narrative and it refers to the disrupted continuity as this territory ruled by the Habsburg kings was not the original size of the former intact Hungarian Kingdom ruled by national kings. The latter emphasises the continuity of the Hungarian Kingdom after 1541 with the kingdom before the Ottoman conquest.<sup>9</sup> Although, Hahner rejects the anti-Habsburgian approach according to which the Hungarians lost their trust in the Habsburgs first because of their anti-Hungarian and anti-Protestant policy.<sup>10</sup> Hahner also claims that the major spirit of the age was to eradicate the Ottoman rule in the central part of Hungary at all costs.<sup>11</sup> Actually, it is a retrospective aspect in which the wish of our modern age is projected back as now we know how serious the consequences of the Ottoman invasion were. The contemporaries had a more realistic political approach to the question and a lack of knowledge of the future. Hahner also claims that Miklós VII Zrínyi (1620–1664) was a respected member of the international nobility of the Habsburg Empire which is a literal paraphrase of the theory of Géza Pálffy.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Hahner writes that the Ottomans attacked Vienna in 1683, this way they forced the Habsburg emperor Leopold I (1657–1705) to take the Ottoman threat seriously. This statement implies that the Habsburgs did not want to liberate Hungary by themselves, it was only a backlash provoked by the Ottomans. It was one of the basic ideas of Ágnes R. Várkonyi, one of the most famous representatives of the modern anti-Habsburgian historians. Conclusively, the introduction of the book contains an eclectic mixture of the elements of the Hungarian pro- and the anti-Habsburgian narratives.

Following the introduction, Hahner gives insight into several foreign political episodes, sometimes coincidences which had positive effects on the course of Hungarian history according to the author. As he writes, if Olympe had not been involved in a scandal in Paris, the French king Louis XIV (1643–1715) would have favoured the son of Olympe who would not have left France forever. This young man was Eugene of Savoy who became one of the liberators of Hungary in the 1680s and 1690s.<sup>13</sup> The argumentation of Hahner contains many “ifs” and it is like an old Hungarian joke: “Hi, honey I saved 500 hundred lives today!” “How did you do that?” “My car was broken down!”. Hahner’s argumentation is the same in the case of the Sun King’s foreign policy. He made so many neighbouring states his enemies

8 Hahner 2019, 12.

9 See in detail: Illik 2016c.

10 Synthesis on the anti-Hungarian policy of the Habsburg court: Weiszár 2012.

11 Hahner 2019, 15.

12 Hahner 2019, 15. The original theory: Pálffy 2014. The opposite was claimed by Tusor 2015.

13 Hahner, 2019, 37–45.

that they supported Leopold I against the Ottomans.<sup>14</sup> This narrative strategy refers to the problem of causation and coincidence in history. According to Richard J. Evans, causation is always arbitrary, therefore it's a personal mental construction.<sup>15</sup> Keith Jenkins says that causation is a kind of time travelling when the narrator tries to find antecedents of an event.<sup>16</sup> This kind of going back in time is limited by the scientific socialisation of the narrator. The interesting paradox of Hahner's argumentation is that his book supposes that Hungary was lucky at the end of the 17th century but he creates a logical and rational narrative out of coincidences. It means that in the past there were coincidences but, in his narrative, they do not exist anymore because they are explained and put in a logical order creating a causal relationship which is the personal mental construction of the author.

Writing about the kuruc leader Imre Thököly, Hahner reflects on Hungarian historiography as well, claiming that vulgar Marxist class-struggle-based socialist narrative built on the kuruc historical narrative spread the idea of Hungarians fighting between two pagans (the Habsburg and the Ottomans) for one country which is not "true" according to the author. The later development of the Habsburg and the Ottoman-ruled territories validates the better nature of the former empire.<sup>17</sup> First of all, even some contemporaries understood the position of Hungary this way, e.g. the aulic archbishop of Esztergom Péter Pázmány, who described the situation of Hungary as the finger between the door and the doorframe.<sup>18</sup> Hahner's argumentation itself raises many questions in a theoretical aspect either as the term "development and progress" in human history is debated and highly complex and, if it exists at all, then it cannot be reduced to one factor such as the nature of the colonising country. In addition, the historiographic situation mentioned by Hahner is also more complex. The Hungarian socialist ideology (1945–1989) had to make a hard decision in Hungary: to support and use some 19th-century-originated patriotic narrative elements to condemn the "internationalist, capitalist, coloniser, exploiting, imperialist" Habsburgs or to tolerate the Habsburgs condemning the 19th-century patriotic Hungarian freedom fighter traditions. The socialist narrative chose the former option. Therefore, after the change of regime in 1989 a paradoxical historiographic situation came into existence as the historians following the 19th-century patriotic narrative traditions evaluating the 16th and 17th-century Habsburg–Hungarian relationship found themselves in the position of socialist historians, while historians exploring the Austrians imperial archives and representing a globalist and internationalist narrative positioned themselves as anti-socialist mainstream historians.<sup>19</sup>

In the following, Hahner focuses on the major players of European history, like Jan Sobieski, Charles of Lorraine, Francesco Morosini, Leopold I, Peter the Great etc. He ele-

14 Hahner 2019, 47–57.

15 Evans 1997, 129–160.

16 Jenkins 2003. 61–64.

17 Hahner 2019, 65.

18 The English idiom for it is „between the hammer and the anvil”. Illik 2013. 207.

19 Óze 2009, 142.

gantly intertwines the colourful lines of the past into a kaleidoscopic narrative of fascinating political events, bibliographical and micro historical elements and stories.

In 1683, Jan Sobieski relieved the last Ottoman siege of Vienna. Hahner does not only write about military events but mentions two interesting gastronomical legends. Allegedly, the crescent roll was invented right then and a café was opened.<sup>20</sup> In 1684, Pope Innocent XI created a Holy League and persuaded the French king Louis XIV not to attack the Holy-Roman Empire in case of an anti-Turkish crusade.<sup>21</sup> Hahner describes the role of Samuel Oppenheimer who was a Jewish banker financing the wars of the Habsburg court. Therefore, Hahner considers him to be one of the liberators of Hungary as well.<sup>22</sup> After that, Hahner tells the story of the greatest liberator, Charles of Lorraine who was French for the Germans, German for the French and Austrian to the Hungarians, therefore he did not become a national hero at all.<sup>23</sup> Venice led by Francesco Morosini also joined the Holy League which forced the Ottoman Empire to divide her forces which was ultimately advantageous for Hungary as well.<sup>24</sup> Accepting the recapture of Buda (1686) as a turning point during the reconquest of Hungary, the above-mentioned politicians were discussed by Hahner because of their role before 1686. Although Hahner gives full bio and evaluation of them, he does not limit his descriptions to their role only during the reconquest of Hungary.

The next commander-in-chief of the crusade after Charles was the Elector of Bavaria Maximilian II Emanuel who recaptured Belgrade in 1688. Hahner characterises him as an ambitious and Machiavellian politician.<sup>25</sup> The author describes the Habsburg ruler, Holy-Roman emperor, Bohemian and Hungarian king Leopold compared to his contemporary, the French king Louis XIV. This way, he gives two complex portraits skillfully using the method of comparison. He tries to give a balanced evaluation of the rule of Leopold but Hahner cannot evade the problem of the Habsburg absolutism and religious persecutions in Hungary. The author's solution is rather contradictive than complex as he claims that there was no Habsburg absolutism in Hungary only an intention to create it and the attempts at forceful counter-reformation and centralisation were not successful. This way, Hahner indirectly and unreflectively accepts their existence.<sup>26</sup> While characterising Leopold and Louis XIV the author also describes the Habsburg Empire and the Austrian House<sup>27</sup> which seems to be invalid regarding the newest research.<sup>28</sup> As the latter emphasises that the term "Austrian House" does not mean the Austrian branch of the dynasty but the whole dynasty itself.<sup>29</sup> The selec-

---

20 Hahner 2019, 78.

21 Hahner 2019, 89.

22 Hahner 2019, 98.

23 Hahner 2019, 110.

24 Hahner 2019, 117.

25 Hahner 2019, 127.

26 Hahner 2019, 132.

27 Hahner 2019, 131.

28 See in detail: Monostori 2009.

29 Monostori 2009, 1029.

tion of the so-called “facts” is also surprising here as Hahner does not even mention the term “shameful peace treaty of Vasvár”<sup>30</sup> which is a fundamental element of the anti-Habsburgian narrative but dedicates a whole page to the religious persecutions in Hungary.<sup>31</sup>

The next character in the kaleidoscope of those figures who willy-nilly supported Hungary is Louis of Baden. He is characterised as a jealous, ambitious and stubborn man who was an excellent soldier.<sup>32</sup> General Veterani was a war-seasoned veteran who fought against Thököly and the Ottomans in Transylvania. According to Hahner, he was the most popular imperial general in Hungary.<sup>33</sup> Another “hero” of the reconquest of Hungary is Frederick Augustus I the son of John George IV and Anna Sophie of Denmark. According to the English Wikipedia, he was Augustus II or Augustus the Strong (as a Polish king), his father was John George III and his elder brother was John George IV.<sup>34</sup> He was a “hero” in apostrophes as he supported Hungary by his fast leave being an incompetent military leader.<sup>35</sup> The Russian tsar Peter the Great is also a hero in this aspect, as he wanted to gain ice-free seaports for Russia and he attacked the Ottomans in 1695, therefore he indirectly supported the reconquest of Hungary. Eugene of Savoy also helped Hungary by defeating the Ottomans in the battle at Zenta (1698) this way forcing them to conclude the peace treaty of Karlóca.<sup>36</sup>

Taking a look at the above-mentioned heroes, three types of them can be seen: (1) Those who fought during the reconquest of Hungary, (2) those who indirectly or accidentally supported the process and (3) those who helped Hungary by their absence. What is common in them, is that none of them are Hungarians. Only a few Hungarians appear in this book, mostly in a negative context, like Thököly as a supporter of the pagan Ottomans and Ferenc Rákóczi II as a leader of a civil war.<sup>37</sup> In the post-modern framework there are different, subjective narratives on the objective past which gives us the freedom and responsibility to choose consciously and reflectively – in this case – our heroes of the era of the reconquest of Hungary (1683–1699) and of the Rákóczi Freedom Fight, for instance, Augustus the Strong or the famous and traditional national hero Bottyán “the Blind”.

In the last third of his book, the author dedicates 30 pages (out of 100) to two famous Hungarian politicians, the commanding prince of Hungary Ferenc II Rákóczi and General Sándor Károlyi. In these descriptions, Hahner coherently opposes the traditional kuruc narrative which positioned Rákóczi into the role of the hero and Károlyi into the role of the traitor of the Rákóczi Freedom Fight as the latter brokered and signed the peace treaty with the Habsburg court at Nagyvárad in 1711. However, the author’s terminology is not com-

30 The author only mentions the fact of the truce concluded in 1664. Hahner, 2019, 132.

31 Hahner 2019, 136.

32 Hahner 2019, 150.

33 Hahner 2019, 157.

34 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus\\_II\\_the\\_Strong](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus_II_the_Strong); Weiszár 2019, 418.

35 Hahner 2019, 168.

36 Hahner 2019, 184.

37 Hahner, 2019, 226.

pletely consistent using the traditional “freedom fight” and the modern mainstream “rebellion” and “civil war” terms as well as describing the movement led by Rákóczi.

In his afterword, Hahner claims that by 1711, the territorial integrity of Hungary was restored in the framework of an empire which could protect Hungary from external threats and the autonomy of Hungary was also safeguarded at the same time. Conclusively, in the next 200 years, peaceful development awaited Hungary which was the great luck of Hungary.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, during this period there were serious conflicts with Joseph II (1780–1790) violating Hungarian autonomy and there was the Hungarian Revolution and Freedom Fight in 1848 and 1849. It also raises the question of continuity since if in the 16th and 17th centuries Hungary was lucky, and the Habsburg Empire served the Hungarian interests then did the Revolution and Freedom Fight in 1848 and 1849 just happen out of the blue caused by sheer unluck?

The book of Péter Hahner is a thought-provoking and inspiring thematic synthesis not only because it contains interesting factual knowledge and deep insight into some details of Hungarian and European history of the early modern age, but it also raises several theoretical questions of the Hungarian historical narrative tradition and its divisions. It also shows that a narrative speaks volumes not only about the past but about the reflected and non-reflected, so-called latent premises of an author himself. In this regard, there are historians<sup>39</sup> who write about Hungarian early modern historical topics without being conscious and self-reflective on their narratives which often contain traditionally contradicting pro- and anti-Habsburgian narrative elements preventing the creation of a coherent narrative. However, the modern Hungarian mainstream historiography tends to evaluate these narratives positively as “balanced” summaries. Although, accepting the basic statement of Jenkins, that “History is never for itself; it is always for someone”,<sup>40</sup> maybe the right question is not the quality of a narrative (level of being balanced, mixed, coherent, clear, traditional, etc.) but its purpose. ■

## Bibliography

- Czike 2008.** Czike, Gábor: Takáts Sándor szellemiségéről. In J. Újváry, Zsuzsanna (szerk.): *Mindennapi élet a török árnyékában*. PPKE BTK, Piliscsaba, 2008. 193–198.
- Evans 1997.** Evans, Richard J.: *In Defence of History*. Granta Books, UK, 1997.
- Hahner 2019.** Hahner, Péter: *Magyarország szerencséje*. Animus, Budapest, 2019.
- Illik 2011.** Illik, Péter: *Történészek, viták a 16–17. századi magyar történelemről*. L’Harmattan, Budapest, 2011.

38 Hahner 2019, 297.

39 E.g. the parts of Eickhoff’s book concerning Hungarian history. Illik 2014.

40 Jenkins 2003, 21.

- Illik 2013.** Illik, Péter: „Kétszáz ezer magyar héjával vagyon magyar ország ez tizenhárom esztendő alatt...” In Ajkay, Alinka – Bajáki, Rita (szerk.): *Pázmány nyomában. Tanulmányok Hargittay Emil tiszteletére*. Mondat, Vác, 2013. 207–210.
- Illik 2014.** Illik, Péter: Ekkehard Eichhoff: Velence, Bécs és a törökök. A nagy átalakulás Délkelet-Európában (1645–1700). In Illik, Péter: *Könyvről könyvre. Recenziók és a reflexiók a magyar kora újkorról*. Unicus, Budapest, 2014. 56–61.
- Illik 2016a.** Illik, Péter: Egy paradigma evolúciója: békék és kiegyezések a kora újkori magyar történelemben. In Illik, Péter: *A tanár, a történész és a komplex*. Unicus, Budapest, 2016. 83–88.
- Illik 2016b.** Illik, Péter: A “kuruc–labanc” értékelési törésvonal a mai magyar köztudatban. In Illik, Péter: *A tanár, a történész és a komplex*. Unicus, Budapest, 2016. 111–120.
- Illik 2016c.** Illik, Péter: Royal Hungary or Kingdom of Hungary? Interpretation, History and Reception of the Two Historical Terms. *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, (2016) 2. 149–152.
- Illik 2018.** Illik, Péter: Kánon, determinizmus, posztmodern. In Botlik, Richárd – Illik, Péter (szerk.): *A mohácsi csata (1526) másképpen. A nagy temető?* Unicus, Budapest, 2018. 7–22.
- Illik 2019.** Illik, Péter: A posztmodern és egyéb hóbortok. In Illik, Péter: *A történészcéh alkonya*. Unicus, Budapest, 2019. 21–87.
- Jenkins 2003.** Jenkins, Keith: *Re-Thinking History*. Routledge, New York, 2003.
- Monostori 2009.** Monostori Tibor: A Magyar Királyság helye az Ausztriai Ház országai között az európai spanyol hegemonia korában (1558–1648). *Századok*, (2009) 5. 1023–1062.
- Óze 2009.** Óze, Sándor: *Nemzettudat és historiográfia*. Hamvas Intézet, Budapest, 2009.
- Pálffy 2012.** Pálffy, Géza: Költő és hadvezér? A politikus, katona és költőirő Zrínyi Miklós különféle lojalitásai és identitásai. *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, (2014) 4. 867–880.
- Péter 1985.** Péter, Katalin: *Esterházy Miklós*. Gondolat, Budapest, 1985.
- Tarkó 2008.** Tarkó, Ilona: Takáts Sándor munkásságáról. In J. Újváry, Zsuzsanna (szerk.): *Mindennapi élet a török árnyékában*. PPKE BTK, Piliscsaba, 2008. 183–192.
- Tusor 2015.** Tusor, Péter: A primás, a bán és a bécsi udvar (1663–1664). *Történelmi Szemle*, (2015) 2. 219–251.
- Weiszhár 2012.** Weiszhár, Attila: A Habsburg birodalomépítés és a Magyar Királyság viszonyának alapvonalai. In Csepregi, Klára – Csepregi, Oszkár – Fülöp, Áron – Illik, Péter – Nánay, Mihály – Weiszhár, Attila: *A történelem peremén*. L’Harmattan, Budapest, 2012. 181–231.
- Weiszhár 2019.** Weiszhár, Attila – Weiszhár Balázs: *Az első birodalom*. Unicus, Budapest, 2019.