

A New Approach to the History of the Peoples of Visegrád

Ádám Somorjai: *A visegrádi népek történelmi morfológiájához* [For the Historical Morphology of the Visegrád Peoples], 2023, Napkút Publishing, page 104. ISBN 978-615-6555-84-7

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The history of the peoples of the Visegrád countries shows similarities in many cases, but we can also detect quite a few differences or contrasts among them. These altogether shape the relationship of the peoples of the Visegrád Group to their past and present, to each other and to other nations.

In his newly published book, Ádám Somorjai takes account of these similarities and differences in a synoptic summary of the topic, which helps to establish a new approach to understanding a subject that has been studied by many before. He does all this with the help of a detailed, multifaceted contemplation, the writing of which, according to the author's confession, was inspired by family affairs and personal life-experiences. His exposition of the history of conceptions has previously been published in two places in the form of a longer study, but now it is in the hands of the reader in the form of a book, supplemented with a few clarifications and provided with notes and coloured maps.

Somorjai's name is not unknown to historians. The Benedictine monk from Pannonhalma, Professor of History and German Language, Doctor of Moral Theology (Pontifical Lateran University), started his career as a high school teacher for ten years, and then worked in Rome for twenty years as an employee of the Vatican State Secretariat and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. During this latter work, he participated in the beatification process of Cardinal József Mindszenty, and with his research, he enriched the knowledge of the prince-primate's life and the understanding of his actions. In addition to this, he dealt with church and order history topics, but we can now read a work on the history of ideas from the prolific author.

The writing published in the volume – linguistically and professionally proofread by Szymon Brzeziński – can be read also in Polish and in the form of a 15-page summary in

English too. The fact that the book is trilingual is not accidental: Somorjai believes that a perspective exists based on which the history of the Visegrád peoples can be told and understood by others. The author wrote his article in the hope of this, in which he invites the reader to a “synoptic examination”. The introduction sheds light on the circumstances and goals of the book’s birth, and then we can read about the history of the “Peoples of Visegrád”. The meeting of the kings in Visegrád, the history of the Castle of Visegrád and its rulers are discussed, but the author also analyses the meaning of the word ‘Visegrád’ in detail.

The next unit – which lays down the basic ideas of the study – revolves around the relationship between Germans living east of the German territories and other peoples living there, and also deals with their connections to Germanness. Here, Somorjai concludes that: “A common element among the peoples of the Visegrád countries is that they consider themselves to be part of the West [...] east of the Germans, they lived their everyday lives together with the Germans.” (p. 16) At the same time, the Germans living here did not assimilate, and they kept their loyalty to the emperor, in the case of the Poles to the king, in the case of the Czechs to the Czech king, who was sometimes the emperor. The chapter concludes with a detailed presentation of the Germans (Saxons, Swabians) living in the Kingdom of Hungary and Poland, mostly based on religious and social approaches.

In the continuation, the movement of the German population surplus to the east and the spread of German-speaking urban culture in the Danube Valley are discussed, and the author finally states that this German “pressure” after a while also became more and more objectionable in the Czech and Polish territories, so “their national rebirth, just like the Hungarian one, was born against Germanization” (p. 21) and because of this, over time, “the German language and civilization became a common enemy for the peoples of the region.” (p. 22) In the end, all of this did not lead to open hostility, since knowledge, culture, and expertise – although not exclusively – were carried by the Germans. However, the author lists several examples that similarly shaped the language or social development of the peoples of the Visegrád countries as part of the resistance to “Germanization”.

At the end of Ádám Somorjai’s thesis, he presents the French, German and then Austrian conceptions of history and based on these, he depicts the development of the statehood of individual peoples. He later compares all of this with the national developments of the Visegrád countries, which he finally depicts in a chronological table. The author’s closing lines succinctly summarize the motif that significantly influences the history of the Visegrád peoples: “The people of the countries of Visegrád believe that they are also part of the West. However, the West does not know it that way up to the present. The people of the countries of Visegrád believe that they are not part of the East. However, the East doesn’t know it that way.” (p. 41)

In the book, the author analyses the presented events and concepts meticulously, proceeding along a wide-ranging system of perspectives (religious, cultural, social). The work has a logical structure, an easy-to-understand and readable style, and the overall picture of the volume was created by the author with elegant logic. The detailed maps prepared by

Attila Sasi, as well as the bilingual (Hungarian and Polish) personal and geographic name indexes at the end of the book, are of great help in depicting the conclusions.

The study is an ideo-historical vision of the history of East-Central Europe, following on from Jenő Szűcs' treatise (*The three historical regions of Europe*), a pioneer of its time and now a well-known work. However, the author's broad approach and his analysis up to the recent past is a niche in the domestic literature. All this could be seen as part of the extensive work of the Waław Felczak Foundation, which can also be seen as a kind of vindication of the arguments presented in the volume. All in all, it can be said that Ádám Somorjai's new book has been written with his usual thoroughness, but this time on the subject of the history of ideas, and can be recommended to a wide audience beyond the historians, as the subject has been of considerable public interest.