

Magyar idők a Felvidéken 1938–1945. Az első bécsi döntés és következményei [Hungarian Times in the Upper Lands, 1938–1945. The First Vienna Award and Its Consequences]. By Attila Simon. Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2014. 247 pp.

On November 2, 1938, as a consequence of German and Italian arbitration, a strip of territory in what today is the southern part of Slovakia was awarded to Hungary. The majority of the population of this territory was Hungarian by mother tongue at the time, and indeed many communities of the region have significant Hungarian communities to this day. For Slovak national consciousness, this decision represented a crime committed against the Slovak nation, which had fallen victim to a dictate enforced by foreign powers. According to public opinion in Hungary, in contrast, the decision represented a just revision of one of the provisions of the Treaty of Trianon, which had been concluded in the wake of World War I. With his new monograph on the subject, Attila Simon attempts to add a third perspective to this discourse on the First Vienna Award. The book, *Magyar idők a Felvidéken 1938–1945. Az első bécsi döntés és következményei* [Hungarian Times in the Upper Lands, 1938–1945. The First Vienna Award and Its Consequences], examines the reintegration of the region into Hungary from the perspective of the Hungarian community of the territory itself, which at the time of the change of rule had lived for some two decades as a linguistic minority within the Czechoslovak state. Simon's book is the most recent work in the historiographical series edited by Balázs Ablonczy and published by Jaffa Publishing House. The series constitutes an attempt to present the history of Hungary and the Hungarian minority communities of Central Europe in the twentieth century in a style that will appeal to a broad readership. It was launched a few years back with the publication of two volumes by Ablonczy,<sup>1</sup> and since then many works by well-established Hungarian historians have been published as part of the series. Simon's newest book should be understood as part of this larger endeavor. Indeed, while working on the manuscript, he was inspired in part by a book by Ablonczy entitled *A visszatért Erdély 1940–1944* [Transylvania Returned, 1940–1944].

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1 Balázs Ablonczy, *Trianon-legendák* [Trianon Legends] (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2010); Idem, *A visszatért Erdély 1940–1944* [Transylvania Returned, 1940–1944] (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2011).

The choice of titles (the reference to “Hungarian times”) indicates the focus of the inquiry and should not be misunderstood as an expression of any kind of nostalgia for a time when what was (and sometimes still is) referred to in Hungarian as “Felvidék” (meaning northern lands and often translated into English as Upper Hungary) was part of Hungary. The brief year between the Vienna Award and the outbreak of World War II and the years of the war itself (during which the territory in question remained part of Hungary) are known in the historical memory of the Hungarian community of Slovakia as the “Hungarian times,” in contrast with the period between 1918 and 1938 or the period after 1945, which are remembered as the Czechoslovak eras. The author’s subjective stance with regard to the subject adds emphasis to this approach. Simon himself is a member of the Hungarian community of Slovakia, and he serves as the director of the Forum Minority Research Institute. This, in part, is why he has striven, as a member of a minority community, to examine an important period in the history of this community.

However, the subjective nature of his perspective in no way detracts from the credibility or seriousness of his inquiry. His attempt to arrive at an understanding of perspectives on the past is not tinged with personal sentiment, nor does it have any shades of victimhood or nostalgia. On the contrary, he has set an important goal as a historian, which indeed he has reached: he draws attention to the failure among historians to devote significant study to the subject and (in no small part a consequence of this) the failure of society to come to foster open discussion of this period of its history. The “Hungarian times” of southern Slovakia have remained undiscussed. As Simon notes in the preface to the book, “even my parents never spoke of it” (p.10). And indeed not only was it not made an openly discussed topic of public memory, it has even been neglected by Slovak and Hungarian historians. Only a few studies have been published on the topic, and to this day no monograph or collection of primary sources has been published dealing with the everyday lives of the Hungarian community of Czechoslovakia in the period following the First Vienna Award. Simon’s book is significant for this reason alone, given that interest in the history of Czechoslovakia in the international community of scholars has tended to focus on the territory that is now the independent Czech Republic and, for instance, the centralist politics of Prague,<sup>2</sup> the so-called German question in the case of Czechoslovakia, or most

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2 Andrea Orzoff, *The Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

recently the question of the loyalties of the Jewish communities of Slovakia.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Leslie M. Waters is the only international scholar to have addressed the issues pertaining to the Hungarian communities of the region in the period under examination.<sup>4</sup>

With this book, Simon also makes an important contribution to general cultural history. This crucial moment in the history of the Hungarian communities of Slovakia, which now stretches back almost a century, are presented not only through discussions of figures who will be familiar to the Hungarian readership, such as internationally celebrated author Sándor Márai, or the propaganda slogans about “Upper Hungary returned,” as for instance Gyula Popély does in his often cited work on the period.<sup>5</sup> Some of the chapters of the book deal with figures of the Czechoslovak milieu. Lajos Jócsik, for example, who had been a prominent member of the Sick Movement is one of the important figures of reference, as are Pál Szvatkó, an important publicist of the interwar period, László Mécs, a priest and poet, and Endre Kovács, who later became a literary historian. Similarly, the book also includes discussion of Tamás Weis, a young Jewish boy of Párkány (today Štúrovo in Slovakia), who was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and who, after his return from the concentration camp, changed his name to Tomáš Radil and, as a member of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science, wrote a Holocaust novel which has since been translated into Hungarian.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the preface begins with a few remarks of Sándor Márai, who has become an emblematic figure of the city of Košice, in which Márai gives voice to the joy he felt at the “return” of the city to Hungary.<sup>7</sup> Simon is quick to note, however, that years after the Vienna Award Márai gave an assessment of the meeting between the Hungarian community of what had been the southern strip of Czechoslovakia and the prevailing system in post-

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3 Rebekah Klein-Pejšová, *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

4 Leslie M. Waters, “Resurrecting the Nation. Felvidék and the Hungarian Territorial Revisionist Project, 1938–1945,” (PhD diss., University of California, 2012); Idem, “Learning and Unlearning Nationality: Hungarian National Education in Reannexed Felvidék, 1938–1944,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 3 (2013): 538–65.

5 Gyula Popély, *Hazatéréstől a hazavesztésig* [From the Return to the Homeland to the Loss of the Homeland] (Bratislava: Madách-Posonium, 2006).

6 Tomáš Radil, *Az auschwitzi fiúk* [Boys of Auschwitz] (Budapest: Pesti Kalligram, 2014).

7 Sándor Márai, *Ajándék a végeztől* [Gift of Fate] (Budapest: Helikon, 2004).

Trianon Hungary that was far more critical than his response immediately after the change.<sup>8</sup>

The second part of the book, which is entitled “Borderline Case,” offers a summary and assessment of the events that led to the First Vienna Award and its later repeal. Simon strives to trace the threads of the events, from the Peace Treaty of Trianon and the domestic policies of the first Czechoslovak Republic to Germany’s foreign policy in the wake of the Munich Agreement, the transformation of the Slovak–Hungarian relationship, and finally the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947. This task is relatively simple, given that there is already a significant body of secondary literature on the diplomatic history and foreign policy implications of the First Vienna Award.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth taking a moment to mention again the problem of terminology that inevitably arises in discussions of the fate of the territory in question. Should one refer to it as “Felvidék” or “Upper Hungary,” as was done in the Hungarian propaganda at time and indeed is sometimes still done to this day? Or should one simply refer to it as Slovakia, its name today? Can these terms be used as synonyms? And is the phrase “southern Upper Hungary” useful, or “southern Slovakia”? This question is complicated by the fact that in the secondary literature in Slovak the phrase “territory ceded by the First Vienna Arbitration to Hungary” (in Slovak *arbitrážne územie*) is frequently used.

Simon tends to use the two terms interchangeably, as indeed he has done in earlier works.<sup>10</sup> He refers most often, however, to “southern Slovakia,” as if this were ever some kind of independent, clearly demarcated region.<sup>11</sup> In my view, this term may be a bit confusing to a reader less familiar with the topic, who is reading about a period in which the southern slice of what today is Slovakia was indeed made part of Hungary, but at the same time, the independent state of Slovakia (the territory of which was essentially contiguous with the northern half of Slovakia today) was not created until March of 1939. Thus I find the term “southern Slovakia” a bit anachronistic in this context.

Simon offers not a synthesis of the topic, but rather a kind of catalogue of issues. Thus in the ten chapters that follow the preface (in which Simon

8 Sándor Márai, *Hallgatni akartam* [I Wished to Remain Silent] (Budapest: Helikon, 2013).

9 See for instance Gergely Sallai, *Az első bécsi döntés* [The First Vienna Award] (Budapest: Osiris, 2002).

10 For instance, Attila Simon, *Egy rövid esztendő krónikája. A szlovákiai magyarok 1938-ban* [The Chronicle of a Short Year. The Hungarians of Slovakia in 1938] (Šamorín: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2010).

11 For more on the term Southern Slovakia, see Elena Mannová, “Southern Slovakia as an Imagined Territory,” in *Frontiers, Religions and Identities in Europe*, ed. Steven G. Ellis and Raingard Eßer with Jean-François Berdah and Miloš Rezník (Pisa: Plus–Pisa University Press, 2009), 185–204.

sketches the outlines of his inquiry) and the second part of the book (in which he summarizes the historical events), Simon addresses the most important issues pertaining to the reintegration of the Hungarian community from the perspectives of political, economic, social, cultural, mentality and even sports and educational history, though naturally not always in equal proportions. He very clearly devotes more attention to political and social history, and he often draws on much of his earlier scholarship. Thus the fourth chapter, which examines the diversity of the party politics of the Hungarian minority communities before 1938 and the ways in which this diversity dwindled after 1938, and the seventh chapter, which deals with the Czech settlement policies in the interwar period, contain the most thorough analyses in the book. Simon gives scant emphasis, however, to the question of economic factors, which are presented in a matter of a few pages in the third chapter (pp.44–50), and the everyday lives of the populations of the region that changed hands. Furthermore, he devotes only a single chapter (the tenth) to the question of sports in the region, which he discusses alongside the transformation of educational and cultural life after 1938, either of which would have merited a separate chapter in and of themselves.

Simon's essay-like anecdotes more than compensate for these shortcomings, however. They make the book more enjoyable and the period under examination more vivid and personal. For instance, in the fifth chapter, which deals with the mechanics of the political screenings, Simon writes about the case of János Kozma, a school principal who before 1938 was both a respected figure of his community and also an active part of local Hungarian cultural life. Nonetheless, following the First Vienna Award, because of baseless accusations and a good bit of human spitefulness, he did not make it past the screenings (pp.93–94). The book also acquaints the reader with the case of Štefan Bolda, a Slovak employee of the Hungarian state railway. He was allegedly more polite, when conducting his job, with Slovak train passengers, so he was reported and then moved from Košice to a place where he would have little chance of coming across Slovaks (pp.140–41). These kinds of anecdotes offer vivid illustrations of the ways in which the policies of the Hungarian state following the First Vienna Award affected the everyday lives of the people living in the territory that had been ceded to Hungary.

Simon identifies the differing forms of socialization in the Hungarian and Czechoslovak communities as the principle source of the grievances of the one-time minority Hungarian community. In 1938, the Czechoslovak Hungarians went from living in a more democratic state that was more developed from

the perspective of social welfare and more tolerant in its nationalities policy to the deeply hierarchical, autocratic Hungary under the rule of Miklós Horthy, where they were often (mostly in government offices) derisively referred to as “Upper Hungary communists.” In the administrative and economic spheres, the Hungarian state demanded immediate transformation. The question of loyalty to the nation, which in the nation-state mentality of Central Europe meant loyalty to the state, was of utmost importance. Even in the more democratic first Czechoslovak Republic this loyalty had been a significant issue. The Hungarian population of the territory that had again come under Hungarian rule thus had to prove its “faithfulness to the nation,” or more precisely that during the twenty some years of “Czechoslovak occupation” it had conducted itself in a manner that was faithful to the traditions and culture of the Hungarian nationality.

The manner in which the population of the territory in question was expected to demonstrate its “fidelity” to the Hungarian nation fundamentally influenced the image of Hungary among the elites of the minority society following the First Vienna Award. In the fifth chapter of the book, Simon offers a vivid portrayal of the frame of mind that characterized the majority of the “Upper Lands middle class” towards the end of 1938 and the beginning of 1939. Members of this community, who for twenty years had not been able, as citizens of Czechoslovakia who belonged to a national minority, to count on positions in state administration, were confident that the change would open the gates to new opportunities for them and that they would receive some kind of compensation from the Hungarian state as if in exchange for the decades of neglect they had suffered. Simon clearly regards the work of the screening committees as having been a miscarriage of justice, since they “put the entire official staff of the region on the accused’s bench” (p.95) and did not provide them with employment after the First Vienna Award. He notes, however, that in the future historians should be cautious to modify the view according to which, instead of members of the Hungarian community from the region, only Hungarians arriving from within the borders of post-Trianon Hungary (referred to in the parlance of the time as “anyások,” i.e. Hungarians from the mother country, or as Paul Robert Magocsi writes, Hungarians who were “pampered and tied to the motherland’s apron strings”)<sup>12</sup> were given positions in government administration in the re-annexed territory.

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12 Paul Robert Magocsi, “Magyars and Carpatho-Rusyns. On the Seventieth Anniversary of the Founding of Czechoslovakia,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 14, no. 3/4 (1990): 427–60.

The foundations for this part are laid in large part by the sixth chapter, which deals with one of the distinctive cultural-history aspects of the integration of the minority Hungarian community of the region, a community that had undergone processes of socialization different from those in Hungary, or what was referred to in the contemporary discourses as the so-called “spirit of the Upper Lands.” Simon draws a contrast between the “neo-Baroque Hungary” of Horthy and the “social idea of the Upper Lands.” This mentality, however, was more an idealized self-image of the Hungarians of the region than it was a regional identity that might bear comparison with the regional identity of Transylvania, for instance. While the Czechoslovak Hungarian communities never had any kind of regional traditions or regional sense of identity before 1918 (since the southern slice of the state of Czechoslovakia, stretching from Bratislava in the west to the sub-Carpathian region in the east, earlier had been an integral part of historical Hungary), Transylvania had been a distinctive and separate region not only from the perspective of geography, but also from the perspective of several centuries of constitutional law. Thus it was hardly a coincidence that after 1938 the notion of a “spirit of the Upper Lands” soon became a concept exploited by politicians, since politicians of every leaning, from social democrats to members of the Arrow Cross party, were able to mold the term as they sought fit. Simon concludes that any such simplistic division of the two societies rests on too many generalizations to remain plausible. The narrowing of the history of the “Hungarian times” to this problem is misleading, since it bears the personal and collective grievances of the minority community. The elite of the Hungarian communities of the region rapidly integrated into the system of the “mother country” after 1938.

This is all complemented by two indispensable chapters on the circumstances of the Slovak and Jewish communities of the territory ceded by the First Vienna Arbitration to Hungary. Slovaks regarded the Award as a kind of national tragedy. Simon clearly dismisses the stereotypical image of the “pious Slovak” and the notion, which to this day is widely accepted, according to which political activism and awareness was much lower among Slovaks at the time than it was among Hungarians. In 1938, a Slovak population that clearly had a strong sense of self-awareness and had experienced democracy in the Czechoslovak republic of the interwar period, enjoying all the advantages of a developed social system (including general and secret suffrage), found itself confronted with Hungary under Horthy. For the Hungarian government, the “Slovak question” was not regarded as an issue to be solved with forceful magyarization, but rather involved

nurturing loyalty among the Slovak communities to the Hungarian state, though it was not easy to persuade Hungarian public opinion of this at the time. In the case of the Jewry of the region, Simon makes the important observation that it would be misleading to speak of any kind of distinctive “Upper Lands” Holocaust. The events of the Holocaust in the territory, which resulted in the deportation of some 30,000 Jews, took place essentially in the same manner as they did in other parts of Hungary. The chapter entitled “Hungarian Followers of Moses” provides a thorough presentation of the processes of the disenfranchisement and persecution of the Jewry of the region.

The chapter devoted to the city of Košice addresses something of a lacuna in the secondary literature, as neither the Hungarian nor the Slovak historiography has dealt with the history of the city between 1938 and 1945.<sup>13</sup> From the Middle Ages to the latter half of the 1940s, Košice was a diverse mix of ethnicities, languages, and religious denominations. And as Simon notes, the city became a kind of symbol of the struggle between Hungarians and Slovaks for control of the territory. According to official census statistics, during the time of the first Czechoslovak Republic the proportion of Hungarians in the city fell below 20 percent, while after the First Vienna Award Košice seemed to change back, from one day to the next, to a city with a Hungarian majority. Simon is therefore cautious about relying on the statistics, as indeed other authors, such as Éva Kovács, have been.<sup>14</sup> In her examination of the national identity of the Jewry of Košice in the interwar period, Kovács persuasively demonstrates that on the basis of the results of the elections that were held in Czechoslovakia, one should be skeptical of the Czechoslovak census results. Her research has shown, for instance, that a far higher proportion of the people of Košice voted for the Hungarian political parties than the proportion of residents of the city who were, according to the census results, of Hungarian nationality. Even into the first decades of the twentieth century, Košice and the other cities of the region were inhabited by a citizenry that was multilingual and often changed its national identity, depending on the pressures of the prevailing state powers. In the case of the city of Košice, it is quite clear that some people replied differently to questions regarding nationality depending on the census

13 On the secondary literature on the topic see Tímea Verešová, “Košice v období rokov 1938–1945 – stav výskumu dejín mesta,” in *Košice a dejiny – dejiny Košíc*, ed. Štefan Šutaj (Košice: UPJŠ, 2011), 147–52.

14 Éva Kovács, *Felemás asszimiláció: a kassai zsidóság a két világháború között, 1918–1938* [Ambiguous Assimilation: The Jewry of Košice in the Interwar Period, 1918–1938] (Šamorín–Dunajská Streda: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet–Lilium Aurum Könyvkiadó, 2004).

(i.e. the government in power). Simon shares Kovács' conclusion, and he offers an illustration of the phenomenon in the case of Košice by examining data concerning the political attitudes and cultural consumption (for instance reading habits) of the population. The chapter also contains a detailed presentation of the modernization of Košice in the interwar period and the transformation of the city into an administrative center.

After 1945, the “Hungarian times,” i.e. the re-annexation by Hungary of territory in the southern part of what today is Slovakia, was one of the primary justifications for the notion of the collective guilt of the Hungarians of the region, a notion that in turn was used to justify deportations, so-called “re-Slovakization,” and Slovak–Hungarian population exchanges. This remains one of the traumatic elements of the shared historical consciousness of the Hungarian communities of present-day Slovakia, and it continues to exert an indirect influence on relations between politics in Hungary and the Hungarian minority of Slovakia. The period between 1938 and 1945 also bore witness to an array of injuries and offences to the Slovaks of the region, and thus the memory of this period continues to encumber relations between Slovaks and Hungarians.

Simon had to find balance in his assessment of the internal and foreign affairs of Hungary under the government of Horthy and the functionality of the interwar Czechoslovak democracy and, within it, the social history of the minorities of Czechoslovakia, for the meanings of the history of the “Hungarian times” in Upper Hungary lie perhaps first and foremost in the meeting—or collision—of these two divergent worlds and the subsequent endeavors to put them on parallel courses towards common goals. With this book, he has made an inspiring contribution that addresses absences and shortcomings in the secondary literature while also providing a highly readable account that will be accessible to a broad readership with an interest in the history of the region.

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