

GÈZA PÁLFFY, *Hungary between Two Empires, 1526-1711*, transl. by David Robert Evans (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021)

In a recent book, historian Gèza Pálffy offers a synthesis of two centuries of Hungarian history, the 16th and 17th centuries. Well-known to the academic world, but also to the general history-reader public, not only in Hungary, but also in general, due to his numerous contributions in different translations into languages of international circulation or in regional languages (spoken in Central Europe), Gèza Pálffy proves to be an eminent connoisseur of the early modern history of Hungary and Central-Eastern Europe. The synthesis entitled *Hungary Between Two Empires* is the product of three decades of research and academic activities and it was anticipated by synthetic contributions regarding each of the two centuries, approached individually. In fact, the author of the synthesis maintains this chronological structure in the organisation of his work. Thus, the book contains two apparently distinctive parts, each dedicated to one of the presented centuries. From a chronological viewpoint, Gèza Pálffy chose the classical limits in outlining the 16th and 17th centuries in the history of Hungary, the chronological limits having been drawn in historiography as early as the 19th century. Thus, the 16th century stretches between 1526 and 1606, these borders being marked by the major political-military events of Hungarian history – the Battle of Mohacs, on the one hand, and the Peace of Zsitvatorok, which ended *The Long War* between the Habsburgs and the Turks, but which also marked the detachment of Transylvania from the Habsburgs' intentions of integration, through the uprising triggered under the leadership of Istvan Bocskai. For the historian Gèza Pálffy, the 16th century, within the aforementioned chronological limits, is characterised by a search for meaning, for a direction in the Hungarian society or in general in the region, which is why he entitled this part of the book *Hungary after Mohacs: a Century of Direction Seeking, 1526-1606* (p. 5-121).

Gèza Pálffy applies the same method in his approach of the 17th century as well. The chronological limits of this century refer to the significant events in the history and consciousness of the Hungarians – on the one hand, the aforementioned Peace of Zsitvatorok and on the other hand the Peace of Szatmár, which ended Francis II Rákóczi's uprising, or the war of independence against the Habsburgs, in 1711. This century, between 1606 and 1711, is characterised by the author as one of decay and, at the same time, of rebirth,

the second part of the book being entitled *Decay and Rejuvenation: the Janus-Faced Seventeenth century, 1606-1711* (p. 123-240).

Gèza Pálffy proved to be well balanced not only in the allocation of the pages in which he approached each of the two centuries of Hungarian history, but also in the historical-thematic problematisation of the presentation. In each part of the book, the historian's discourse is composed of a series of symmetrical historical issues. The presentation of the 16th century debuts with a tragic political-military event, the Battle of Mohacs, and ends with the Peace of Zsitvatorok, the century being thus framed by the political-military history benchmarks. Between these limits of the political-military history, Gèza Pálffy follows the evolutions of the Hungarian society on several levels: the relations with the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire, the birth of the Principality of Transylvania, of the social, demographic, economic, confessional and cultural structure. The result is the image of a Hungary in motion, in continuous transformation. On a political level, we are witnessing the disappearance of the kingdom, the rupture of the unity between the land occupied by the Turks and transformed into a pashalic, the territories occupied by the Habsburgs and the Principality of Transylvania; from a social and demographic viewpoint, there were significant changes, through colonisations and changes of the elite (the aristocracy and the migration of the nobility from the territories occupied by the Turks), the appearance of certain new social groups; on a confessional level, the epoch is significant through the affirmation of the Reformed denominations, which fundamentally changed the confessional structure of this region of Central Europe; last but not least, in cultural terms, we are witnessing the affirmation of humanism and the Renaissance, the flourishing of intellectual culture, or what the author regards as "a golden age for Hungarian culture." The understanding and explanation for these ample changes, or "searches", as Gèza Pálffy calls them, are part of the general political-military, social, confessional and cultural transformations from Europe, particularly from Central Europe, where the advance of the Ottomans and the competition for power supported by the Habsburgs imprinted a particular evolution in this region. Despite the tragic perspective induced by a part of historiography as a result of the military disaster from Mohacs and the division of the Hungarian Kingdom between the Turks and the Habsburgs, the view emerging from Gèza Pálffy's presentation is rather optimistic. Despite its dissolution through its integration in the Habsburg Empire, Hungary westernised, transforming into what the author calls "the bulwark of Central Europe," playing an important role in "the European commercial mechanisms." In fact, by using the term "search", the author highlights an internal perspective, proving the strength of the Hungarian society at that time in its ability to adapt and survive.

The presentation of the 17th century, in the second part of the book, is paced by the same palette of historical problematisation. Beginning from a circular view defined by the political-military marks, Zsitvatorok (1606) and Szatmár (1711), Gèza Pálffy systematically presents the social, demographic, economic, cultural and confessional situation of Hungary. The century is tormented by multiple military campaigns, in its first part, the campaigns of the Transylvanian princes against the Habsburgs in Hungary in the context of the Thirty Years' War, the devastating Turkish-Tatar military incursions which, in the author's opinion, resulted in an "uprooting" of the daily life. The repeated wars caused certain restrictions of the economic life and certain social unrest, while the intellectual and cultural life suffered "monumental destructions." However, one can also note a renewal of the political elite, a flourishing of the county nobility, the obtainment of new privileges and autonomy, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, which meant the partial revival of the medieval authority. The Hungarian language that established itself from the previous century, giving rise to true literary treasures, was institutionalised and unified and, thus, new cultural institutions were established, as well as new literary genres. All of these processes that marked a revitalisation of the Hungarian society, in Gèza Pálffy's view, were limited by the quasi-permanent war, by the militarisation of the society. Thus, the 17th century offers the image of a world that oscillates between decay and rebirth, as a mark of the era.

Due to this perspective, dominated by the search for meaning in the Hungarian society, by the radical transformations, by decay and ruin, as well as by survival and rebirth, by the affirmation of a modern Hungarian cultural identity, Gèza Pálffy's approach differs from the traditional interpretations from the Hungarian historiography, often inclined to discover, in the period between the 16th and 17th centuries, a time of an obsessive movement of affirming the national independence and unity. On the contrary, the author emphasises that this national cultural unity was achieved under the auspices of the Habsburg Monarchy. Starting from this observation, namely that of a Hungary ruled by two rival empires, the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire, with a Transylvania under Turkish control and surveillance, the historian opted for defining the entire period of the 16th and 17th centuries as a "Hungary between two empires", which is, in fact, the title of his book. From the very beginning, the author confesses that he aimed to understand and to evaluate the most critical period in Hungarian history" in a "more realistic way than his predecessors had done.

Written in an elegant and seductive way, well-balanced, with assessments that are not only unique, but also solidly argued, with an exceptional iconographic support (maps, illustrations etc.) wonderfully distributed throughout the book, professor Gèza Pálffy's book will surely impose

itself as an original synthesis with a substantial echo among the readers who are both historians and history enthusiasts.

As he himself declares, the author's ambition resides in the construction of a synthesis on the history of Hungary that would continue the problematics described by the monograph from 2005, authored by Pál Engel, entitled *The Realm of St. Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895-1526*.

Accompanied by this ambition, by an in-depth knowledge of the epoch he describes, by direct research conducted on the historical events and processes of Central Europe, historian Gèza Pálffy's book opens a path towards the minds and understanding of his future readers.

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