

**László Zsinka:**

## **Similarities and Differences in Polish and Hungarian History**

In my lecture I would like to give a general introduction to a comparative approach of Polish and Hungarian history. I am convinced it could be not only an interesting, but a relevant issue as well. This approach could be touching emotionally for average Hungarian and Polish people because both nations strongly felt last centuries that they had common historical fate in East Central Europe. There is evidence which prove that Polish-Hungarian friendship is not only a modern phenomenon, but it is originated from the historical past. Historical memory calls the attention that Polish-Hungarian friendship was rooted already in the early modern history, and it was not constructed by historians, but a special relationship between the two nations was a widespread and accepted concept for the wider public in Hungary. I can cite the well-known proverb which represents it: „Pole and Hungarian – two good friends, joint fight and drinking are their ends.” In this lecture I don’t want to give a complete list of differences and similarities, but to call the attention to some interesting aspects of two nations’ common historical fate.

The relationship between Polish and Hungarian history is not an emotional question for historians. To characterize similarities and differences between the two nations’ historical process could be relevant approach for historiography. The analysis of Central European peoples’ common characteristics can be originated from the 20th century historiography. It was examined by Polish, Czech and Hungarian historians. Between the World War I and World War II Handelsman, Halecki and Bidlo dealt with this problem. Their concepts were published at an international historical congress in the 1930s. In Hungary an internationally wellknown medievalist, Jenő Szűcs expressed his opinion about common features of Czech, Polish and Hungarian historical development in the 1980s.

Jenő Szűcs created a characteristic concept of Central Europe. He supposed that foundations of Central European history at the first millenium were in close connection with Western European development. He explained that between the 11th and 15th centuries not only Christianization and its cultural consequences were implemented, but well-defined social features emerged in Central Europe based on Western characteristics. The keyword of Western social development after millenium was the spread of liberties and autonomies in Western Europe. These phenomena appeared in the middle of the 13th century in Central European countries. We find self-governments of towns, counties and parliaments at the beginning of the 14th centuries. Szűcs argued that these medieval characteristics of Central European historical features were the fundamental reason why we could classify Poland and Hungary as countries with the tradition of freedom which makes this region a part of Western development.

This led to the concept in the 1980s that Central Europe couldn't be seen as an inherent part of East Europe any more. It became impossible to find a historical argument to maintain the reason of Russian military occupation in the last decade of the Cold War.

To identify European history with tradition of freedom is a well-known and widespread interpretation not only for European historiography but for European political philosophy as well. This concept had a special meaning during the Cold War because freedom or lack of freedom seemed to be the basic difference between West and East for Western political thinkers. The concept of freedom was overevaluated as a fundamental element of Western political tradition in these decades. It was in strong connection with the concepts of the antitotalitarian thinkers between World War I and World War II. The concept of freedom appeared as a justification of Western characteristics for Central European opposition intelligentsia in the 1980s, and played an important role in redefining Central European identification and self-interpretation for opposition circles. With the help of this concept they were able to distinguish themselves from East Europe and Russia.

After this general introduction I would like to say some words about the origins of Polish and Hungarian history. There was a strong difference between Polish tribes who settled down gradually, and whose settlement area took shape as a consequence of a long and invisible process in the 9-10th centuries, and Hungarian tribes who arrived at the Carpathian Basin as a result of a spectacular, fast and unplanned immigration.

There are common particulars during the birth of the states at the first millennium in Poland and in Hungary. This process took more than one generation. It was Mieszko that began and Boleslaw that continued the state-building and introduced Christianity in Poland. It was Géza that began and Stephen that implemented it in Hungary. The first generation had to destroy the old pagan and tribal system, and the second generation had a chance to build up a new order in both countries. The representatives of the second generation, Boleslaw and Stephen were crowned which represented their fundamental results.

Both Boleslaw and Stephen enjoyed the favourable short-term consequences of two idealist politicians at the first millennium. These two idealists were Emperor Otto III and Pope Sylvester. They supported the birth of independent Christian states in Central Europe. Spread of Christianization seemed to be more important for them than to demonstrate the influence of the Holy Roman Empire over newly emerging Central European states.

It was also the result of this short favourable historical period that Polish and Hungarian churches were founded as archiepiscopacies independently from the German church. The consequence of these foundations can be seen clearly if we compare the situation of the Polish and Hungarian churches with the Czech church. There was only an episcopacy in Prague subordinated to the archbishop of Mainz.

The bishop of Prague became archbishop only in the 14th century. Dependence from the German church was a chance for German political and cultural influence, which was refused in Poland and Hungary already at the beginnings with the early birth of archiepiscopacies.

Let me say some words about the medieval age after the historical beginnings. There is a definite difference between Polish and Hungarian historical development from the 11th to the 14th centuries. The Árpád's dynasty was able to maintain the unity of the country during these centuries. There were conflicts among members of the dynasty which didn't lead to the disintegration of the country. Kings sometimes had to give enormous areas to their ambitious sons who ruled over a significant part of the kingdom almost independently from the king. There was a Hungarian tradition of the so-called junior king, which demonstrated the wide autonomy of the archduke towards the king in power. This phenomenon didn't result in a weakening state. There was only a short period in medieval Hungary after the demise of the Árpád's dynasty when the strongest landlords (*barons*) almost disintegrated the state.

In Poland the size of disintegration can be depicted in a totally different way. There were longer periods in the 12th and 13th centuries when the Polish kingdom existed only virtually. Princes had wide autonomy. In the middle of the 13th century the fragmentation of the country was on its climax. The role of the kings was actually eliminated, and the Catholic Church had crucial significance in maintaining the spiritual unity of the nation. It was a turning point in the Polish history when Lokietek Wladislaw was crowned with the help of the pope, which represented the strengthening unity of the country at the beginning of the 14th century. This political process was similar to the Hungarian political development where Angevin (Anjou) dynasty also strengthened the central power. In the 14th and 15th centuries both countries developed towards national unity. Moreover, we can see similar social development in both countries. There were two important aspects of these similarities, firstly emerging urban autonomies, secondly formation of nobility's rights. The beginnings of urban autonomies originated from the 13th century in both countries. German urban patterns had an absolute effect in Poland. We find German and Italian urban patterns in Hungary.

How could we characterize the nobility's widening rights in Poland and in Hungary? The strengthening nobility narrowed the king's power in both countries. By the end of the medieval age there was a widespread concept that it was not only the king that represented the country but he shared his supremacy with nobility as well. This was demonstrated in Werbőczy's laws in Hungary at the beginning of the 16th century. Werbőczy was a legal expert who summarized medieval Hungarian law. He suggested that the country should be represented by the Sacred Crown which consisted of the king and the nobility. There were similar political thoughts in Poland too.

In general the nobles' rights widened in Poland and Hungary during the 14-15th centuries. The bourgeoisie was weak in both countries, which increased the nobility's importance. The rise of the

bourgeoisie in Western European countries resulted in decreasing significance of the nobility in early modern times. The relationship between the king and the nobility became the key issue of the late medieval Hungarian and Polish states. It is more than an interesting coincidence that Angevin Louis, the king of Hungary in the 14th century, who later became king of Poland too, was the ruler who widened the rights of the Polish nobility. He did the same in Hungary too. It was an important step for Polish and Hungarian nobilities in their development towards getting autonomy and rights. It can be seen as a symbolic moment that the charter of privileges for Polish nobility's rights was issued by Angevin Louis in town Kassa in Hungary.

The 15th century can be interpreted not only as a period for tendencies of similar social development, but the two countries were joined by common struggle against the Turkish Empire. After Habsburg Albert's death, who was the king of Hungary for a short time in the middle of the 15th century, the majority of Hungarian nobility elected the Polish king Wladislaw as the king of Hungary with the support of the strongest baron of Hungary, Hunyadi János (John Hunyadi). The arguments for Wladislaw were simple, but essential. Everybody hoped that the kingdom of Poland could give effective help to Hungary against the Turkish Empire. By that time Hunyadi had already conquered Turkish troops several times at the southern border of the country. He was considered as a hero by the Hungarian public. The young Polish-Hungarian king and Hunyadi cooperated against Turkish power which opened one of the most beautiful chapters of the two nations' history in the 15th century. In the 16-17th century Poland and Hungary became the bulwark of Christianity against the Turkish Empire. This long-term historical role began with the military cooperation between Wladislaw and Hunyadi in the middle of the 15th century.

In the 16th century we find increasing divergence between Poland and Hungary. This century was a „golden age” for Poland if we take into consideration the military power of the Polish state in comparison with Russia, or the increasing export of agricultural products towards Western countries. It was an exceptionally favourable period for export due to the so-called price revolution and economic boom in agriculture. Further factor of the „golden age” was the cultural flourishing of the Polish renaissance.

In this period Hungary was divided into three parts, and one third of the country was occupied by the Turkish Empire. The unity and sovereignty of the country became a fundamental problem for Hungary. Habsburg and Turkish troops devastated the country continuously. In the 16th century the University of Cracow attracted many Hungarian students, who returned to Hungary with the spirit of Polish humanism. There was a crucial gap in Hungarian education: the lack of a university until the 17th century resulted in an increasing cultural importance of the Cracow university for Hungarian education in early modern times.

In the age of reformation Catholic-Protestant conflict wasn't so rude in Poland as in Hungary. In general Poland remained a Catholic country with tolerancy towards weak Protestantism, but in Hungary there were bloody wars between Catholic and Protestant churches which were in close connection with the problems of Habsburg (Catholic) centralization and preservation of (Protestant) nobility's rights. Dominating catholicism and ortodoxy in the eastern regions of Poland led to special problems, which contributed to the decline of the country's unity in the 17th century.

Eliberation of Hungary from Turkish Empire was a symbolic moment in the field of interconnections between Poland and Hungary at the end of the 17th century. This was the starting point of Hungary's reunification, and the last moment when Polish great power was able to influence Central European political events. By September 12 1683, Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa's enormous army had been besieging Wien for two months. Finally, the imperial forces united with the troops of John III. Sobieski, king of Poland, who came to relieve, and conquered the Turkish besiegers. The Grand Vizier wanted to continue the war, and Christian armies won further battles attacking the enemies along the Danube. These military events were under commandment of Sobieski, who was a talented main general of allied troops and completely devoted himself to eliberating Hungary. He left an impression on Hungarian history. He was the last king who maintained the illusion and reality of Polish great power. It was a special chance for Hungary that his activity had favourable impact on Hungarian history.

The permanent struggle between Habsburg centralization and Hungarian nobility led to a balance in the long run in the 16-18th centuries. This was the reason why dualism was maintained between the king's and nobility's power even until modern times. In Poland the 17th century was a turning point, when dualism – sharing power between king and nobility – developed towards a noble republic model, which was based on the *articuli Henriciani* and the extremely widening right of using *veto*. This process resulted in radical restriction of the king's power and led to the external weakness of the kingdom in comparison with the strenghtening absolutisms, which surrounded Poland. The increasing power of these absolutist states was in sharp contrast with Poland's collapse. This tendency became the fundamental reason of the country's divison into three parts. The frustration originating from the loss of the independence hindered Polish elites to find long-term compromises with the Russian emperor who had occupied a major part of the country. Perhaps a compromise would have been able to lead to a solid balance between national interests and Russian occupation. Due to the wide competencies of the self-government Hungary was able to find the route between national autonomy and Habsburg Empire easier in the 19th century.

Tragedy of Polish state can't be derived from the presumption that Polish nobility might have been more conservative than Hungarian nobles and this might have been the most important reason why they weren't able to strenghten and to renew the country. No, it was rather a political bargain among

the surrounding great powers which led to the disappearance of Poland. In the last moment of the independence enlightened circles of Polish nobility wanted to modernize the country. Moreover, enlightenment emerged in both countries, which had its influence on nobilities. At the end of the 18th century enlightened Polish and Hungarian nobilities put emphasis on modernization programmes. This tendency was continued in the *reform age* in Hungary in the first half of the 19th century which enabled the strong interconnection between patriotism and progress. Hungarian political thinkers expressed that their keywords were patriotism and progress, and we find a similar way of thinking in Poland. European cultural movements – for example romanticism – had strong impact on both countries in the 19th century. With the help of Western European political and cultural patterns Polish and Hungarian political thinkers realised that the modernization of the country is more important than particular interests of traditional elites. They were able to work out national-level programmes. Although the implementation of these concepts were hindered by Russian and Austrian absolutisms, the strong correlation of patriotism and progress guaranteed that issues of economic-social modernization could not be expropriated by Russian and Austrian absolutist rulers.

In the 19th century the possibility of the nation's death meant a central problem for Hungarian patriots, which was articulated in strong connection with the feeling of fear towards nationalities – it is important to call the attention to the fact that (as a consequence of resettlement of the country after Turkish occupation) Hungary became a multiethnic country in the 18th century and only half of the population spoke Hungarian language. In contrast, it was not the vanishing of the nation but the lack of the state that emerged as a fundamental difficulty for the Polish.

After the First World War the ethnic homogeneity of the post-Trianon Hungary – which had lost two third part of the former Hungarian kingdom – and the multiethnic character of Polish great power created by peace system of Versailles were in sharp contrast with each other. In spite of this, basic difference neither Poland's nor Hungary's political position was guaranteed in Central Europe due to the imminent German and Soviet great powers. In the 20th century similar historical experiences created a similar pattern of geopolitic self-interpretation in both countries. It was a widespread approach among political and cultural elites to see the geopolitic situation of the country as something that was determined by Russian and German great powers. This concept was integrated into a wider historical framework by some political thinkers and historians (for example by Oscar Halecki).

After the Second World War Poland and Hungary became part of the Soviet bloc, but historical development of these countries in the last half century could be distinguished in many details. During the epoch of the Soviet Empire Polish civil society was able to preserve more autonomy than Hungarian society. The Polish Catholic Church was able to preserve its integrity to a greater extent towards the one-party state. The small-holders in the countryside also preserved their land in Poland while in Hungary they were forced to enter common propriety forms. On the other hand, the economic

development seemed to be more successful in the Hungarian countryside. In Poland the power didn't confiscate small-holders' land, but withdrew financial sources from villages, which was in sharp contrast with modernizing Hungarian agriculture, which was becoming target of state development sources.

In the last decades we find a basic difference between Polish and Hungarian democratization process. It was a result of an ambiguous political bargain between communist and opposition elites in Hungary with low intensity of social participation. In Poland the situation was different. Strong and widespread social movement emerged in the 1980s as a result of Solidarnoszy's activity. Although the real picture is more complex (for example in the 1980s the Polish opposition elites also made compromises with the communist power, Solidarnoszy's activity didn't lead immediately to freedom, and not only social movements, but external relations also contributed to the success of the Polish opposition), the Polish society was able to consider the first free election as a result reached by themselves.

These differences had important consequences in the last twenty years. Acceptance or refusal of political bargain between communist and opposition elites has become a basic dividing line of the political scene in Hungary for the last two decades. We can interpret fundamental divisions of the Hungarian political scene mainly with the help of this difference even these days. The social movements in the 1980s guaranteed the feeling of the Polish society that they could provoke their freedom under their steam, whereas the frustration of the Hungarian democracy even after 20 years since the first free election is owing to the fact that Hungarian people won the freedom without any struggle and the wide participation of the society. In the postcommunist period these preconditions permitted the strengthening of the Polish national identity to a greater extent than of the Hungarian.

### **Selected bibliography for further information:**

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