

Recent Writings on Hungarian Historiography by S. B. Várdy

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Hungarian Historiography and the Geistesgeschichte School — A magyar történettudomány és a szellemtörténeti iskola. Cleveland: An Árpád Academy Publication, 1974. 96 pp.

Modern Hungarian Historiography. Boulder, Colorado: East European Quarterly (distributed by Columbia University Press), 1976. 333 pp.

A concern with the history of historical scholarship, or the self-examination of the development of a profession, is invariably undertaken as a constantly practiced sideline by some historians, but only a very few write historiographical accounts and even fewer concern themselves with the methodological, ideological, and philosophical dimensions of historical scholarship.

Hungarian historiography has been hardly written about since the professionalization of scholarship in this discipline has been institutionalized, in the modern sense, during approximately the past two centuries. This is not meant to state that there was no history written earlier; there quite obviously was, as even the cursory but compact introductory chapters of Várdy's book, *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, describe. There was, however, no institutionally based historical profession, until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries generally, and the mid-nineteenth century in Hungary. Indeed, the organization of the Hungarian Historical Society dates back to 1867, although support for the historical profession was provided by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences through a commission for the study of the past in 1854.¹

The history of the development of historical studies in Hungary has not been extensively written about and the books under review comprise one of the best major efforts yet undertaken to provide an account of this development. There are a few other books and studies in Hungarian and German which deal with some aspects of the subject, but no other

sound and scholarly comprehensive accounts.² There is the book written by Alexander Flegler,³ a friend of the nineteenth century Hungarian historian László Szalay, a few sketchy studies in periodicals and general books dealing with historiographical developments⁴ and a doctoral dissertation by this reviewer,⁵ which, however, deals more with ideological and methodological concerns and is not strictly a historiographical study. Hence, the publication of these two books fulfills one of the long neglected needs of Hungarian historiography and one can only hope that Várdy as well as others will continue to broaden and especially deepen our understanding of the development of Hungarian historiography, important not only for the understanding of a historiographical heritage hitherto mostly neglected, but also because an understanding of this particular branch of scholarly activity opens up new vistas in the study of Hungarian intellectual, cultural, and literary life as well. Furthermore, these studies can also contribute to an enhanced comparative understanding of the development of European historiography.⁶

The brief dual language book, *Hungarian Historiography and the Geistesgeschichte School — A magyar történettudomány és a szellem-történeti iskola*⁷ anticipates, in somewhat abbreviated form, the ideas and conclusions presented in the other, lengthier and more substantial, treatment of the same and other topics. Hence, those who wish to read a briefer treatment of some of the major trends in twentieth century Hungarian historiography, especially those who read Hungarian only, will be well served by this briefer version. However, the specialist, and those interested in following the argument more closely and obtaining a more comprehensive account, must definitely read the longer version presented in the other book.⁸ Since the argument and basic philosophical orientation in the two books under consideration is sufficiently identical, the substantive discussion in this review will generally be based on the lengthier version.

A few observations concerning the basic thesis of both books should be briefly stated before considering the structure, orientation, and content of these works. It is Várdy's thesis that the widely held belief that the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation was the only viable one in interwar Hungarian historiography should be modified. In his words: "This study deals basically with the nature of inter-war Hungarian historiography. Its basic thesis is that — contrary to the generally accepted belief by inter-war and more recent historians — the so-called *Geistesgeschichte* (Szellemtörténet) School, while undoubtedly the most important one, was not the only worthwhile orientation or school in the historiography

of inter-war Hungary.”⁹ While accepting this judgment in its essentials and also understanding the fact that there were numerous other historical schools operative in Hungarian historical scholarship in interwar Hungary, there is another sense in which the idealistic philosophical foundation characteristic of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation was shared, in some way — often misunderstood, invariably misinterpreted, and insufficiently appreciated — by the numerous strata comprising Hungarian historians and the educated reading public. Virtually all of the other orientations discussed in these books had in common, if nothing else, an anti-materialist conception of history; thus, an insignificant number of Marxists notwithstanding, a dominance of some form of philosophical idealism, of an essentially eclectic character and irrespective of how well understood or how greatly misunderstood, characterized interwar Hungarian intellectual and cultural life generally. It should be added that there was no official imposition of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation; indeed Várdy’s discussion of the numerous schools of thought only underscores this often neglected and misunderstood characteristic of interwar Hungary. Thus, Várdy is quite correct when he states that there were numerous other historical schools influencing Hungarian historical scholarship, but I believe that he neglects to emphasize adequately that the philosophical influences which gave birth to the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation in Hungarian historical scholarship were more pervasive than his argument would indicate.

In order to fully appreciate the pervasiveness of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation in Hungarian thought, including naturally historical thought in the first half of our century, it is necessary to conceive of this orientation as a multi-faceted, complex, essentially idealistic (in both the epistemological sense and the sense that ideas were to be considered as the motive force of history and historical change), and an obviously anti-materialistic conception of history. Even those who polemicized with Szekfű and some of the other major figures in the formulation and propagation of the Hungarian *Geistesgeschichte* orientation, with very few exceptions, stayed within the confines of an essentially idealistic frame of reference.¹⁰ An anti-materialist philosophy of history was undoubtedly dominant, but it existed not as a monolithic and superimposed ideology, but as a widely held and accepted pattern of thought and sentiment in many diverse forms and manifestations. Although other, mostly non-idealistic patterns of thought (Marxist, positivist, existentialist, etc.) also exercised a limited impact in Hungarian intellectual circles, these were by no means widespread. In sum, it can be

argued that many of the opponents of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation were opposed only to certain manifestations of it and not to the dominant idealistic orientation of interwar Hungarian intellectual life.

Thus, there are at least two other observations which must be made about the philosophical dimension of Várdy's account of Hungarian historical scholarship. Despite the excellent organization of the work, a feature much praised by some of the reviewers,¹¹ and the relative completeness of his account of Hungarian historiography — based furthermore upon solid and painstaking research to which all future scholars will be indebted for quite some time — the discussion of the principles and development of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation in historical thought is quite sketchy, especially when the determination of the character of this school of thought is related to the major theme. This brevity of philosophical discussion characterizes not only his account of the origin of this school in mostly, but by no means exclusively, German philosophic thought concerning the nature of historical knowledge and the methodological concerns of the human sciences more generally; the discussion of the Hungarian philosophers and thinkers instrumental in preparing the mental climate for this orientation, which was to influence so fundamentally Hungarian historiography, is also quite brief and limited to more or less a listing of some of the pertinent individuals and some of their works. His numerous and informative, quite often perceptive and trenchant, comments about historians and their works, so valuable a feature of much of the book, are not to be found to the same extent when he is discussing philosophers and their writings.

Second, another feature of his works which this reviewer wishes to cast a critical glance at, is the characterization of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation and the philosophy of Dilthey and other thinkers of that orientation as irrational.¹² Indeed, this is the major criticism I wish to make of the otherwise commendable and very useful two books.

Other than the fact that the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation should more properly be termed as anti-positivist, anti-materialist, and generally as post-rationalistic in the sense of being opposed to the Enlightenment conception of rationalism, Várdy's discussion of this orientation obviously suffers from his characterization of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation as irrational, augmented furthermore by at least one attempt to link idealism and irrationalism.¹³ In all likelihood, this characterization of this orientation as irrational may have its origin in a similar judgment concerning the *Geistesgeschichte* school as irrational by György Lukács, the eminent Hungarian Marxist philosopher, whose ideas con-

cerning this orientation have a wide circulation in philosophical circles, so wide that sometimes this judgment is accepted without specific reference to the source in the writings of Lukács.¹⁴ It is for these reasons that subsequent work in the field of Hungarian historiography and Hungarian intellectual history generally, will have to come to terms with the philosophical dimension and certain related issues, specifically the epistemological problem of historical knowledge and the numerous significant concerns centering on the meaning of the human experience (the speculative philosophy of history), in order to obtain an understanding not only of the development of the tradition of Hungarian historiography, but also the motivations which shaped it and the ideas which inspired it. However, the discussion of these issues was not the theme the author of these books chose to develop, hence he cannot be faulted for not doing so. Nonetheless, these observations are intended to broaden those vistas which Várdy's books have opened for the reader concerned with these subjects.

It is an often stated truism that reviewers sometimes review the books they have not yet written and this reviewer's case is no exception to that generalization. However, an attempt to explain the philosophical and methodological aspects and concerns of Hungarian historical scholarship in its intellectual and cultural setting could not be undertaken until this extremely well structured and organized, pertinently and exhaustively documented, and pioneering work had been completed.

Turning attention to the structure and content of the book, it should be stated again that one of the major accomplishments of Várdy was to have provided an organizational schema, in itself an act of historical synthesis, to make the discussion of a myriad of orientations and individuals, comprehensible and structured. There can be little doubt that after a careful reading of these books one will have a good working knowledge of the Hungarian tradition of historical scholarship, augmented by an even more comprehensive understanding of two individuals whom Várdy has chosen, most properly one might add, to emphasize, namely Gyula Szekfű, whom he considers as the dominant influence in the development of the *Geistesgeschichte* orientation, and Elemér Mályusz, the developer of the ethnohistory school and an outstanding historian of social and institutional structures. His account of Szekfű is based upon a very comprehensive collection of works by and about him, whereas the account of the career and works of Mályusz, is based also upon numerous personal interviews and an extensive correspondence. Várdy's numerous and extended opportunities to work in

Hungarian libraries, archives, and institutes, coupled with personal contact with a number of Hungarian historians, further enhances the source value of some parts of his book.¹⁵

Generally, most Hungarian historians and their works are at least mentioned, although one would have hoped for a slightly less diffused discussion of the other major figures; quite often one must turn to the index to find numerous scattered comments about individuals such as Bálint Hóman, Péter Váczy, Sándor Domanovszky, as well as numerous others. Although most themes and concerns of Hungarian historical scholarship are covered, some even in separate chapters — specifically East European studies, world history, legal and constitutional history, auxiliary and allied sciences — there are other fields, such as the philosophy of history and church history, both Catholic and Protestant, which at least in the judgment of this reviewer, could have been discussed in a less diffused manner in the first instance and more completely in the second instance.

These critical comments and observations notwithstanding, Várdy's contribution to our understanding of the Hungarian historiographical tradition should prove to be fundamental and no one who proposes to work in this field can afford to neglect his efforts. This well researched and detailed account of the history of Hungarian historical scholarship in the twentieth century (prefaced by a few brief background chapters concerning earlier developments) serves as a very useful introduction and guide to the labyrinth of Hungarian historiography. It is undoubtedly a work of fundamental importance.

NOTES

1. Concerning the establishment of the Hungarian Historical Society see Imre Lukinich, *A Magyar Történelmi Társulat története, 1867-1917* (Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1918), esp. pp. 15-24.
2. Most of these other studies and books are cited by Várdy in his very extensive bibliographies, see *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, pp. 289-297, especially the works of Hóman, Léderer, and Lékai.
3. Alexander Flegler, *A magyar történetírás történelme* (Budapest: Franklin, 1877). The book was originally published in German.
4. The sections, in most instances only a few pages, dealing with Hungarian historiography in these major accounts of historiography are very sketchy and inevitably misleading. Hopefully, publications, such as Várdy's books, will provide the information which will make subsequent general accounts of historiography more accurate and complete when dealing with Hungary. Among those major accounts which have generally insufficient and very incomplete

- information about Hungarian historiographical developments include, but are by no means limited, to the following: Harry Elmer Barnes, *History of Historical Writing*, 2nd. rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1962); Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der Neueren Historiographie* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1925); George P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959); and James Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1942).
5. Thomas Szendrey, *The Ideological and Methodological Foundations of Hungarian Historiography, 1750–1970* (Ph.D. diss., Jamaica, N.Y.: St. John's University, 1972).
 6. Other books which have contributed to an enhanced understanding of European historiography by presenting a national historiographical tradition include Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History, The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1968); Konstantin F. Shteppa, *Russian Historians and the Soviet State* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962); and Bert James Loewenberg, *American History in American Thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).
 7. The discussion of this book is based upon the English version.
 8. *Modern Hungarian Historiography* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Quarterly, 1976).
 9. *Hungarian Historiography and the Geistesgeschichte School*, p. 59.
 10. *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, p. 247, chap. 12, fn. 3, citing a letter from Mályusz to Várdy, March 30, 1975. Mályusz writes: "I did not turn against *Geistesgeschichte*, only against Szekfű's and Hóman's interpretation and use of the same — being as they were guided by ulterior motives, the desire for success [and] in search of cheap glories." Furthermore, this reviewer recalls a conversation with Mályusz, held at the Várdy residence during their IREX tenure in Budapest in May 1970, during which Mályusz stated that his historical orientation had indeed been idealistic in nature.
 11. Most of the reviews I have seen have mentioned the excellent organization of *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, including the reviews published in Hungary, especially one by Emil Niederhauser in *Századok* 111 (1977): 826–827.
 12. The term irrational is used any number of times and was objected to by other reviewers, specifically Lee Congdon in his brief review published in *History — Review of New Books*, January 1977, p. 77.
 13. This is most evident in a discussion of the activities of Sándor Domanovszky, where he writes as follows: "In other words, while trying to dethrone or at least lessen the influence of the *Geistesgeschichte* School, Domanovszky himself attacked the philosophical foundations of the positivist system he represented. Thus, while generally opposing idealism and irrationalism, (emphasis added) at this time Domanovszky appeared to speak up for an idealist and irrational (emphasis added) interpretation of history, placing himself dangerously close to the position of the *Geistesgeschichte* historians." *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, p. 169.
 14. With the exception of one book by György Lukács, *Magyar irodalom — magyar kultúra* (Budapest, 1970), listed in the bibliography, there are no other references to the works of Lukács, even though he dealt extensively with the

philosophy of Dilthey and related subjects in his book, *Az ész trónfosztása* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965) and numerous other books and essays. Furthermore, a selection from the works of Dilthey was published in Hungarian; Wilhelm Dilthey, *A történelmi világ felépítése a szellemtudományokban* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1974).

15. See the preface to *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, pp. xiii–ix.