

Horvátország a 7. századtól napjainkig [Croatia from the Seventh Century up to the Present Day]. By Dénes Sokcsevits. Budapest: Mundus, 2011. 846 pp.

Once upon a time there was an 800 year-old Hungaro–Croatian confederation. Croatia was the only single 'foreign' state that permanently stood under the reign of the Holy Crown of Hungary. An occupation army from Hungary was never stationed on Croatian territory—it simply was not necessary. The coexistence of these states was based on a general agreement and was secured by several internal and external interests. This peaceful coexistence made this confederation unique in Eastern Europe. In general Croatia had had no secessionist ambitions, even when the existence of the Hungarian kingdom was thrown into question by the Mongol invasion of 1241 and the interregna of 1301–1308 and 1526. The first considerable differences appeared in the seventeenth century, when the Croatian ambitions for autonomy gained strength. An armed conflict between the two states broke out only once during the 800 year period of coexistence (in 1848–1849). But even that war was far from being a real obstacle in the later political negotiations between Hungary and Croatia. Despite these facts, both national historiographies turn a blind eye to the history of this coexistence.

The book by Dénes Sokcsevits is the first monograph about Croatia published in Hungary.¹ The author based his work primarily on Hungarian and Croatian archival and secondary sources. The book is very informative with regard to historical events and it has a clear train of thought. The different periods are presented through political, economic, social and church history. The author sometimes focuses his investigation on a region like Dalmatia or Slavonia, sometimes on a town like Trogir/Trau and Dubrovnik/Ragusa, sometimes on a family like the Šubić family, or sometimes on a politician like Martinuzzi Fráter

1 The most crucial Hungarian historians dealt with the Croatian history: Endre Arató, *Kelet-Európa története a 19. században* [The History of East-Europe in the Nineteenth Century] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1971); László Bíró, *A jugoszláv állam 1918–1939* [The Yugoslavian State 1918–1939] (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 2010); László Katus, "A nemzetiségi kérdés és Horvátország története a 20. század elején" [The Nationality Question and the History of Croatia in the Early Twentieth Century], in *Magyarország története*, vol. 2 of 7, ed. Péter Hanák (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1978); Gyula Miskolcay, *A horvát kérdés története és irántói a rendi állam korában*. [The History of the Croatian Question and Its Writing in the Period of the Estate State], vols. 1–2. (Budapest: MTT, 1927); Emil Niederhauser, *A nemzeti megújulási mozgalmak Kelet-Európában* [National Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977); Imre Rész, *Kapcsolatok és kereszttutak* [Connections and Crossroads] (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2004).

György/Juraj Martinušević. His main aim is to demonstrate that the history of country and nation cannot be regarded as a straight line of historical events. In contrast with traditional Croatian historiography, which constructs a simplified history of Croatia with the nation in its center, Sokcsevits intends to present the history of the state as a whole made up of several different mosaic tiles. It is a particular virtue of the author's approach that he interprets and analyzes each and every disputed question and opinion with regard to Croatian history. One should also note that Sokcsevits does not fail to deal with problems to which Hungarian historiography has turned a blind eye (e.g. why the Croatian nobles refused to join the uprising led by Rákóczi).

From a structural point of view the book can be divided into three major parts. The first part deals with the history of Croatia until 1918, focusing on Hungarian–Croatian coexistence and later the process of succession. The differences of opinion and interests between the political elites of the two states appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century, when the Hungarian king proved unable to protect the Croatian counties from Ottoman attacks. That is the very beginning of the relationship between Croatia and the Habsburg dynasty. Two important phenomena of the seventeenth century influenced the Hungarian–Croatian relationship profoundly in the long run. On the one hand a difference in the interpretation of constitutional law emerged between the two states. While the Croatian estates began to emphasize that the state connections were based on equal rights, so Croatia had to be regarded as a joint and not as a subordinate state, the Hungarians insisted on their concept of Croatia as a conquered state (i.e. in their perception Croatia had been conquered by the Hungarian kingdom in the eleventh century). On the other hand, the aristocratic conspiracy against the Habsburg dynasty in 1671 proved an especially tragic turning-point in the relationship between the two states. The conspiracy was organized by families that were the main representatives of Hungarian–Croatian coexistence. After exposing the plans for an uprising, the Habsburgs practically ruined the families of Zrínyi/Zrinski and Frangepan.

The period of 1790–1848 can best be characterized by the fact that the national idea gained primacy both in Hungary and in Croatia. Due to the perception of Hungarian nationalism as a threat, Croatian politicians began to build up closer connections with Vienna, and the Habsburgs refused to take the Hungarian opinions into consideration in their Croatian policy. According to Sokcsevits, however, even in that period both nations shared a common feature: their nation-building process and language reforms were modeled on the same

patterns. It was Lajos Kossuth who in 1848 questioned the autonomy of Croatia on the basis of constitutional law, and it was also Kossuth who adamantly rejected any proposal regarding the federative transformation of Hungary. Furthermore, he intended to make the Hungarian language compulsory south of the Sava. It was therefore hardly surprising that the Croats could be easily instrumentalized by Vienna during the 1848–1849 Hungarian War of Independence. It was the first time that these countries had gone to war with each other. It is worth noting, however, that the troops of Banus Jelačić were regarded as enemies by the Croats of the Transdanubian counties. And as a “reward” for having sided with the Habsburgs, Croatia lost its autonomy and sank to the level of a crown-land.

Both political elites turned a blind eye to the consequences of the 1848–1849 events. They proved unable to reach an acceptable compromise during the negotiations of 1866–1868. On the one hand, the Habsburg Empire was transformed into a Dual Monarchy, which was obviously unacceptable to the majority of the nations of the empire. On the other hand, the Croatian–Hungarian Settlement in 1868 was judged by the Croatian politicians as a bad compromise. It had the potential, however, to bring about positive change. It was Ferenc Deák who suggested a real union and broad autonomy for Croatia, but his suggestions were ignored by the other members of the Hungarian delegation (Gyula Andrassy and Menyhért Lónyay). It is also an unknown detail of the 1868 negotiations between Pest-Buda and Zagreb that Deák warned his Croatian colleagues against South-Slav unity. According to Deák, South-Slav unification would be led by Belgrad and not Zagreb. On the whole, Croatia could attain autonomy than it had set out to win, but it is important to mention that the autonomy it did obtain was *unique* in Europe at the time. The Home Rule Bill, elaborated by William E. Gladstone in 1880, was modeled on the Croatian–Hungarian Settlement. (The British parliament refused to accept the bill, because the members wanted to save imperial integrity.²)

After the Settlement of 1868 was accepted, the quality of the relationship between Pest-Buda and Zagreb went from bad to worse; trust was gradually lost. Both sides began to pursue a policy based on emotions. One illustrative example suffices to demonstrate the regrettable aftermath: Croatia had a bad economic structure and taxation moral in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it was one of the most underdeveloped countries within Austria–Hungary

2 Imre Röss, *Kapcsolatok és keresztutak*, 120–21.

(pp.400–1). The Hungarian authorities tried to transform the economic structure and develop a taxpayer culture on an administrative basis. (The construction of an effective bourgeois state can be characterized by authoritative methods in the whole of Eastern Europe – even in Hungary.) The structural reforms were regarded by the Croats, however, as new forms of oppression. At this point, citing the Czech example, Sokcsevits refutes the popular thesis of Croatian historiography according to which independence was the most important condition of economic development. By 1918 the dual system of Austria–Hungary had fallen. The political forces of Croatia anticipated the total defeat and the reorganization of the empire; but it remained an illusion.

The second part of the book deals with the position of Croatia within Yugoslavia. The creation of the new state was due first and foremost to the policies of Great Britain and France. The concept of the new federal state was laid on uncertain foundations from the outset. On the one hand, the idea of a united South-Slav nation was a simple utopia. On the other hand, the most crucial assurance of internal state cohesion was the violence practiced by the government on administrative and military grounds. The responsibility of the different Croatian political groups must also be emphasized. In the very moment of the collapse of Austria–Hungary it was only Stjepan Radić who consistently protested against giving up all Croatian national ambitions during the negotiations with Belgrad. In the end Croatia became part of a South-Slav state that was ruled by the Serbs. The Croats, who were accustomed to living in a constitutional state, found themselves in a Balkan country where democracy and state administration stood at a lower level than before 1918. The federal government adopted a violent policy towards Croatia and solved the main political problems with the use of security forces. The Serb politicians were simply unwilling to make any compromises until 1939. The sabor was not convoked for 20 years. The new situation provoked new social ruptures in the twentieth century. The transformed party structure of Croatia was characterized by more or less radical attitudes towards autonomy, federation and independence. The political ambitions restricted and hindered by violence and the disappointment in the federal states resulted in a complex set of armed conflicts in World War II. There was a war between Croats and Serbs on the one hand but also between Croats and Germans and Italians. The warriors of the Ustaša movement and civil organizations fought against the communist partisan divisions. The last scene of genocides can be regarded as particularly tragic, because it was supported by the British and Soviet armies. The allied forces

handed thousands of Croat prisoners of war over to the partisan troops of Tito, who let them be butchered. The denial and memory of this event have remained one of the heaviest burdens in the relationships between the South Slav nations.

The second Yugoslav federal state was born in blood and could only have been governed by a dictator. Although the system of Tito brought some novelties, such as federalism and the intention of assuring equal rights to all nationalities, it was characterized by state violence, the inability of the political leadership to reach compromises, dictatorship, and collective amnesia forced upon the population. The Yugoslav states in the interwar and post-war periods shared another common feature: the most essential external cohesive force of the federal state was primarily the interests of the great powers. The fake propaganda image of Tito's Yugoslavia, according to which the Croats could be regarded as fascists and the Serbs as victims of the war, also proved a grave burden. According to one of the extreme but tenacious assessments of Tito's state, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of economic development and material growth. Since the archival materials are far from completely processed, Sokcsevits' aim is to approach the history of the second Yugoslavia from many points of view. The conclusion of the second part of the book is that Yugoslavia was on the verge of collapse in the late 1980s from all points of view and its existence was maintained only by the Western great powers.

Although there are numerous monographs and articles dealing with the period between 1991 and 1995, because many of the archival sources remain closed, the history of the war of independence has to be interpreted extremely cautiously. Sokcsevits has done so. The interpretation of the events is laconic and analytical. He outlines the psychological path that led to the bloody showdowns, lists the acts of violence committed by both sides, and criticizes European policy, which was unable to handle the armed conflict. The very last chapter of the book summarizes the post-war history of Croatia.

The author often reflects on the assertions of Croatian historiography. According to Sokcsevits, the majority of historians more or less submit to the national discourse. They are inclined to neglect Hungarian–Croatian coexistence and search instead for separatist movements in the past. (Sokcsevits often compares and exemplifies the differences between the conclusions drawn by Hungarian historians and the conclusions reached by Croatian historians; see the maps on pp.270–71). The author criticizes the East European view of the British historiography as well. According to Sokcsevits, even today the majority of British historians approach the history of this region from the point of view

of the (imperial) British state, and they are therefore unable to understand local problems and realities (see the assessment of fascism and communism).

As far as the weaknesses of the book are concerned, the presentation of the Hungarian–Croatian relationships is sometimes too dominant. In order to demonstrate the main problems of Croatian history better, Sokcsevits would have to provide a wider historical background and give more reference points (about the Orthodox commonwealth of the Balkans, the overseas empire of Venice, the imperial ambitions of the Habsburg dynasty and the nation building processes in Italy). It is not clear how the different territories (like Dalmatia or Slavonia) and social groups (like the Italian speaking Dalmatians) and strata became “Croatian” in the nineteenth century.³ The author often refers to how the Serbian Orthodox Church made “Serbs” out of the different Orthodox groups of Vlachs and Balkan Slavs. This statement, however, is also true in the case of the Croatian Catholic Church: it was not just the Orthodox population that had escaped from the Middle and South Balkans. Dalmatia, Szerémség/Srem and Határőrvidék/Vojna krajina (Military Frontier) were the last station for Catholic Albanians as well. E.g. Arbanas (in Hungarian Orbonás, ital. Borgo Erizzo) near Zara and the Catholic villages of the regiment of Pétervárad / Petrovaradin were established by Albanians, and it was the Croatian national church that made them Croatian in the nineteenth century. (Not to mention the origins of several villages in Slavonia that were established by Hungarians from Transdanubia.)

According to Sokcsevits, Croatian history only began to share close affinities with Serbian history in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (pp.200–2). Considering that the abovementioned nations lived next to each other and spoke closely related languages, this claim needs to be challenged, too. The Christianization of the Serb territories was organized in Rome, and not until the thirteenth century was it decided that the Serb state would be Orthodox. The Serbs were part of the Catholic world for centuries.⁴ Furthermore, South Dalmatia had connections to the Serb *župas* that were similar to the connections between Croatia and Middle-Dalmatia.⁵

3 Cf. Konrad Clewing, *Staatlichkeit und nationale Identitätsbildung: Dalmatien in Vormärz und Revolution* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001).

4 Cf. Viktor Novak, “The Slavonic-Latin Symbiosis in Dalmatia during the Middle Ages,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 32, no. 78 (1953): 1–28.

5 It follows from the foregoing that according to the writer of this review the pope of Duklja is neither part of Croatian nor Serbian history, he belongs to the history of *Duklja*.

In the chapters dealing with the history and the collapse of the second Yugoslavia, Sokcsevits does not touch upon one essential factor: the Tito system tolerated and contributed to organized crime. Furthermore, Tito instrumentalized crime to promote his political aims: several intellectuals and politicians of the opposition were killed by criminals in the service of the Communist Party. Organized crime became an independent factor after 1989–1991 and played a significant role in the South-Slav wars. The clarification of this role calls for complex and refined research.

The writing of the history of a nation or a country can never be finished. As time passes, new sources and approaches emerge that raise new questions and offer new answers. Sokcsevits's book, however, will remain a valuable part of this ongoing conversation in the long run.

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