

Tudomány és ideológia között. Tanulmányok az 1945 utáni történetírás történetéről [Between Scholarship and Ideology. Essays on the History of the post-1945 Historiography]. By Vilmos Erős and Ádám Takács. Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó, 2012. 169 pp.

A collection of essays that provides methodologically and theoretically complex analyses of the history of Hungarian historiography of the postwar period, *Tudomány és ideológia között* (Between Scholarship and Ideology) helps address a lacuna in the scholarship that remains painful to this day. At the time of the conference on historiography on which this collection is based, a work by Ignác Romsics was already available as a kind of fundamental study on the topic.¹ Romsics followed a traditional concept of synthesis that handles historiography itself, as the “protagonist” of the inquiry, as an intact problem of the calling of the historian, regardless of the historical era. His analysis tells little about the era-specific conditions of the practices of writing history. Accordingly it does not provide satisfying explanation of the historical context concerning institutional, ideological and socio-cultural factors, which could make clear the reasons for the prominence of careers and works.

The lack of such examination is particularly problematic with regard to the analysis of the Socialist period. Romsics demonstrates the expectations of the Socialist system with regard to historical scholarship, but he does not examine how this was translated into practice. He cites statements made by historians, but because his analysis provides no era-specific problematization of the subject, it reveals little about the ideological stakes of the discourse and the actual substance of these statements of historians addressed to an (also unanalyzed) “public.” Romsics presents the prominent historians, but he does not explain how their work or their stances might offer insights into the prevailing circumstances of the time or how exactly the terms and conceptual frameworks within which they articulated the questions of their profession should be understood. The voices and historical moments to which he refers remain incidental. Within the framework of his synthesis, Romsics proves unable to find proper analytical tools to uncover their message. When he lists the array of topics with which historians concerned themselves, the contextual body of knowledge remains

¹ Ignác Romsics, *Clio bűvöletében: Magyar történetírás a 19-20. században* [Enchanted by Clio: Hungarian Historiography in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries] (Budapest: Osiris, 2011).

stuck within the system of objects and facts. Thus for a university student today, the book offers little grasp of what it actually meant to write history in the recent past, and yet the book is intended precisely for this audience.

The volume of essays, which was edited by the conference organizers, Ádám Takács and Vilmos Erős, adopts an entirely different approach. With regard to the post-1945 period, the title suggests that we turn our attention to historiography in the shared spaces of scholarship and ideology. This perspective, which places emphasis on the importance of approaching both fields of inquiry with the same sensitivity, creates the potential for analyses from a variety of approaches, such as the history of ideas, social history, or the history of mentalities. As the analyses clearly illustrate, the study of the nature of historiography after 1945 also represents an occasion for self-reflection. It prompts us to address the question of “what shapes us, as historians.”

The conference volume is not a hodgepodge collection about the historiography of the era. The majority of essays provide the reader with a kind of distinctive constant of the postwar period from the perspective of the practices of history writing. Furthermore, some of the authors (Ádám Takács, Zsolt K. Horváth, Vilmos Erős and Holger Fischer come to mind) offer strategic suggestions based on their own research for comprehensive analysis of the nature of the era. Regarding the overlapping terrain of scholarship and ideology, the essays examine the study of history in their social context and highlight the importance of social institutions in its analysis. They place emphasis on dependencies, compulsions, and socio-cultural factors involved in the study of history as a profession that determined the development of the “discipline.” The volume demonstrates first and foremost that the questions and problems of historiography shed light on the era and the mental determinants of living with particular force. I will examine how the individual essays address this question. Do they manage (and if so, how) to make the era more accessible to interpretation from the perspective of the manner in which historiography was pursued?

Perhaps the most successful essays in this regard are those that deal with the historiography of the Socialist era. This is unquestionably due to the constant and carefully guided presence of ideology in the Socialist period. In this case, ideology is understood as something that cannot be separated from the cultural system of everyday practices. Ideology is also something the nature of which changes over time, but which nonetheless is present in the functioning of society as a whole and extends beyond the borders of individual periods of history. One

therefore cannot avoid—and the historian in particular cannot avoid—dealing with the social institutions in which it finds form.

The essay by Holger Fischer, which is the first of the collection, presents the shifting nature of ideology with the division of post-1945 historiography into periods. His goal is to systematize the manner in which political-historical eras appear in the evolution of the study of history and individual fields within the discipline. At the beginning of the essay, Fischer asks the question, what tasks did the party assign to the discipline of history? As this question makes clear, any analysis of the period must address the peculiar system of conditions of the scholarly study of history. According to Fischer, the historian enjoyed more freedom in Hungary than in any of the other Socialist countries. He often speaks of the absence of ideology in the historiography, while at the same time he displays, at the apex of this historiography, the synthesis entitled *Magyarország története* (“The History of Hungary”),² which complied with both scholarly criteria and the official ideological function of historical narratives. Thus in the professional context, it would be appropriate to speak not of freedom from ideology, but rather of scholarship that developed within era-specific limitations, even if this “scholarship” is not defined analytically in Fischer’s essay.

The essays that follow concentrate more forcefully on the practices of history writing. They do not attempt to define the essence of historiography on the basis of a priori political-historical shifts, but rather examine the politicized countenance of the era from the perspective of the practices of writing history. These analyses actually throw into question the necessity of explicit periodization, for while they “contextualize” historiography and examine it in its normative space (which is also determined by the flexible nature of ideology), they also indicate connections and interrelationships that can be discerned over longer periods of time and even *form* mentality. What are the practices that the authors make the focus of their inquiry?

Boldizsár Vörös examines the strategies according to which historians attempted to meet the expectations of the public over the course of the entire Socialist period. He is interested in part in the mechanisms of self-censorship and in part in the concrete steps that historians took in order to convey ideas that were “problematic from the perspective of power” (p.71) (for instance by adhering for the better part of a text to the party rhetoric, but then inserting

2 The authoritative work of late socialist historiography in Hungary, the so-called “ten-volume” history of Hungary. Zsigmond Pál Pach, ed., *Magyarország története tíz kötetben* [The History of Hungary in Ten Volumes] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976–1989).

statements that undermined this rhetoric). The legitimate problems of scholarly endeavors led to the spread of the characteristic practices of the era.

The essay by Károly Halmos offers a glimpse into a complementary process. He does not ask how scholarship becomes a politically viable product, but rather how the political is made into the scholarly, drawing on the example of Ferenc Erdei's theory of a dual society. He mentions some of the decisive features with which Erdei's system of views is integrated into the historian's store of implements. Halmos calls attention to strivings to renew and revivify historiography and the increasingly palpable craving for alternative theories in the Socialist period. This is in part a story of the reinterpretation of the meaning of scholarship, which could only satisfy its craving for renewal by drawing on a realm the scholarly content of which only seemed justifiable within the framework of the political and social conditions that prevailed at the time.

György Kövér examines the mechanisms of the writing of economic history in the early years of Socialism, i.e. the beginning of the 1950s. His analysis offers insights into the milieu of the discipline of history at the Academy. As his sources amply illustrate, ideology was closely tied to cultural practices and representations, and it was adapted through these practices to academic life. The "planned economy" nature of scholarship and the practices of debate culture and self-criticism in the new interpretation of the science of history clearly reveal the influence of the models of party life at the beginning of the 1950s.

Zsolt K. Horváth sheds light on practices in the writing of history in connection with the "canonization" of the workers' movement. Of the various implements in the (particularly sensitive) historiography of the party and the workers' movement, the practice of selection seems to have been one of the most important. The ability to select judiciously from among the historical sources presupposed the internalization of the ideological system of perspectives and the capacity to create a kind of "scholarship" that was based on a distinctive understanding of the term. The ability to select judiciously, however, was characteristic not only of historians who dealt with questions of political history. Rather, it was a skill every professional historian had to master.

Csaba Lévai examines reception as a practice in the development of the historiography in the Socialist period, drawing on the example of the responses to the work of Charles A. Beard and Carl L. Becker, whose theory of "subjectivist-relativist-presentism" gradually become part of the discussions among historians in Hungary. Because of the ideological filters under Socialism, reception was an actively used and controlled practice in the shaping of historiography. Lévai

calls attention to the fact that the notion introduced by these two authors “was immediately elevated into the political and ideological context. In other words, the opinions that were formed of them in Hungary not only reveal a great deal about them as historians, but also reveal a great deal about the functioning of the system (p.113).”

In his analysis, Vilmos Erős deals first and foremost with the professional legacy of the historians of the interwar period. He examines how it was present in the historiography after 1945. While the previous two essays shed light on the ideological functions of reception and selection as tools in the writing, according to Erős the identification and control of the institutionalized forms of historiography originated in the interwar period, the intellectual heritage of the so-called *civic* historiography, and the convictions of the profession were part of the practices that were aiming to transform the writing of history into a substantially ideological activity.

In contrast with the other authors, Ádám Takács switches the perspectives by reading the party resolutions as discursive sources. The author examines how the party ideology circumscribed the practices of historical research. Thus he offers an answer to the question of what this scholarship that found a place within the system of conditions of the Socialist era, actually was. The Party directives defined the practice of academic research as the “discovery of reality” which in principle transcends the ideological functions of scholarship in the “formation of socialist conscience”. In turn, this “discovery of reality” was the domain that seemed to promise for the study of history an autonomous field of inquiry. However, historical research nonetheless remained within the confines of ideological conditions (including institutional and socio-cultural factors). Thus the notion of “autonomy” should be understood in relative terms. According to Takács, the historians’ debate, for instance, was never allowed to evolve beyond anything more than an “evocation” of “the atmosphere of a genuine scholarly debate (p.97)”. This also meant that in certain areas the possibility increasingly existed to fashion intellectual products identified by Takács as “postideological (p.100),” in other words products that, from a peculiar perspective, could be regarded as comparable with scholarship.

Because of their focus or the approach adopted by the author, three essays in the collection do not examine how the practices of the historian shed light on the era in which they were used. They each survey a corpus of materials that has been assembled in a specific field of research. Judit Pál examines works of Hungarian social history in Transylvania after 1945. The isolation that the

authors of these works have faced (and still face) is symptomatic of Hungarian and Romanian historiography, but this study does not explain the development of this isolation or the development of the Transylvanian institutions of historiography. In another essay of the volume, István M. Szíjártó establishes international parallels in order to further interpretations of Hungarian works of microhistory. He does not, however, shed much light on the practices of the era, such as the processes of reception or the circumstances of the early development of microhistory. The essay by Éva Standeisky can also be classified as such. She examines endeavors that were made after 1989 to situate the so-called “coalition times” between 1945 and 1950 within historical periods. Standeisky also does not devote any attention to the question of what the methods with which this period is discussed might reveal about the 1990s or possibly even the first decade of this century. In all likelihood, there is little or no examination or elucidation of the era in these essays because the authors, in their discussions of the given corpuses, are not analyzing practices the evolution of which could be tied to ideological expectations or in any specific way to the Socialist era. In the case of the other essays, the functioning of the ideology of the Socialist era constitutes the curious feature that enables scholars today to examine the broader horizon of an era on the basis of an analysis of the workings of a discipline.

In addition to furthering our understanding of an era (and perhaps the Socialist era in particular), the study of the history of historiography offers an occasion for reflection on the discipline. The authors of this collection took advantage of this opportunity. Some of them even included their observations regarding the present in their essays. The questions addressed in *Tudomány és ideológia között* call our attention to the historical question of the influence exerted on historiography by the political. According to these essays, any analysis of the post-1945 historiography (and indeed any contemporary self-interpretations) must address the question of the place of ideological horizons in scholarly practices. The statement made in the preface to the collection is worth pondering, “historical discourse is the only discourse that can establish a critical standard by which to assess the possible social and political uses of history (p.7).”

In this respect, an assessment of the legacy of the discipline must go beyond a mere examination of how ideological discourses become an integral part of institutional scholarly life. As a subject of further reflection, one could consider the state of affairs that developed parallel with this, a state of affairs characterized by Erős in his essay with the simple observation that “the interest in theoretical questions (...) was fundamentally tepid (p.162).” This diagnosis

is thought-provoking, even if Erős was comparing the situation in Hungary at the end of the Socialist period with the situation in the countries of Western Europe, where theoretical innovation found fertile ground. The challenges that characterize the effectiveness of scholarly historical writing on the social stage today call our attention to the shakiness of the theoretical preparedness of historiography in some of the areas of the discipline. The position of theory could be strengthened in the practices of history writing if the study of the history of historiography were seen by historians as a useful implement in this undertaking.

Translated by Thomas Cooper

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