

Rendi ellenzék és kormánypárt az 1751. évi országgyűlésen
[The opposition and the governing party at the 1751 Diet]. By János Nagy. Budapest: Budapest Főváros Levéltára–Mika Sándor Egyesület, 2020. 584 pp.

The history of the 1751 Diet is hardly one of the least researched or most neglected topics in Hungarian historiography, the new monograph by János Nagy is nonetheless a unique undertaking. It is the first historical work since János Rozgonyi's mini-monograph published in 1944 to focus specifically on the 1751 Diet, but more importantly, it adopts a complex approach to the subject. Nagy sets out to reinterpret the history of this important eighteenth-century Diet in the context of a joint intersection of several historical sub-disciplines, each of which is complete in itself. Overall, the main virtue of the work—in addition to the thoroughness of the analyses, the detailed presentation of the contexts, and the extensive use of sources—is the consistent, simultaneous application of three main analytical perspectives.

One of the main approaches used by Nagy is political historical analysis (p.11), which is not, however, merely a reconstruction of the course of the debates on the issues discussed during the diet. Although the book also includes numerous new findings on this latter subject, perhaps more important is the identification of regionally specific patterns of political behavior that can be discerned during the *tractatus diaetalis*, the political bargaining process between the ruler and the estates, and the resulting sketch of a kind of political map of the country (chief counties, pro-government counties, swing counties, and opposition counties). Equally important parts of the analysis include the discussion of the relationship between the county deputies and other parliamentary groups (upper house, clergy, absentee envoys).

Nagy focuses his analysis on the group of county deputies. This choice of focus is well founded in social history, since in recent decades the secondary literature (first and foremost and in the greatest depth István M. Szijártó) has thoroughly discussed the process that took place in the mid-eighteenth century, during which the prosperous landowning (*bene possessionatus*) gentry became a dominant power factor in the counties and then on the main stage of “national” politics, in the arena of the diet. In essence, this meant the emancipation of the lesser nobility from the aristocracy in the counties, i.e., the dissolution of the early modern system of patron-client relations and, within the institutional system of the diet, it resulted in the dominance of the lower house over the

upper house. Nagy's analysis convincingly demonstrates that these processes had already clearly determined the balance of political power in favor of the lower table and the prosperous landowning gentry by the diet of 1751.

The main thematic “densifications” of the diet, which are given particular attention (and in most cases a separate chapter) in the political historical sections of the volume, are the election of the palatine, the debates concerning the regulation of trade and customs, the question of taxation, the annexation of the new free royal cities, and the debate concerning the new indigenates. In reconstructing the history of the 1751 Diet and identifying the main stages, junctures, and turning points in the debates on these subjects, the volume presents a respectable body of research. Moreover, in several debates, Nagy succeeds in refining the findings in the literature to date by identifying the most active participants in the debates. This is a remarkable achievement, since the eighteenth-century parliamentary diaries are not, for the most part, verbatim records of the debates but rather only summaries of their contents, which rarely included the identity of the contributors.

Based on analyses of the history of the debates, Nagy modifies the findings of previous research in several cases. With regards to the debate on serfdom, Nagy corrects the narrative rooted in the literature according to which the demand for a general settlement of the serf question was almost exclusively linked to the government and its enlightened turn in the 1760s. As he shows, the issue of the *úrbér* had already been raised in the 1751 Diet, precisely by the opposition in the lower house, some of whom raised the possibility of a parliamentary settlement of the burdens of the serfs as a kind of “ultima ratio” in the debate on the tax increase in order to lighten the tax base, i.e., to make it easier to pay the higher taxes asked by the ruler (pp.158–160). In the case of other issues with modernizing aspects raised and/or supported at least partly by county deputies during the discussions at the Diet (such as river regulation, trade, and education), the analyses also illustrate that the rigid application of the binary model, which unilaterally links the conservative attitude to the estates and the modernizing attitude to the government, sometimes oversimplifies the real complexity and potential ambiguity of the past. Perhaps the most valuable parts of the volume in this regard are those that capture precisely this complexity through meticulous, “down-to-earth” analyses.

The other important approach of the book is a social-historical perspective. The chapters on typical trajectories and social strategies, which are representative of particular groups and individuals selected from the Diet, show that there

were long-term trends and patterns of public action not only at the regional and county levels, but also within the public action patterns of individual families and individuals.

Finally, the third approach, which is treated as equal to the others, is the discursive analysis of the parliamentary debates. By focusing on the use of concepts, modes of argumentation, and political languages, Nagy explores the linguistic-rhetorical toolbox used by the participants in the parliamentary debates. He shows that the main rhetorical weapon used by politicians linked to the government was the appeal to the common good and the needs of the ruler, while members of the opposition mainly used elements linked to classical republicanism and arguments of the rhetoric of grievances. He also places great emphasis on the analysis of the parliamentary pasquils, a group of sources that he uses primarily to reconstruct the self-image of the estates. In the course of his analyses, he also points out that political languages were usually used not in pure forms, but rather in mixed variants. In this respect, it should be noted that the metaphor of mixing, which is often used in recent Hungarian intellectual history in connection with the description of political languages and which can be traced back to John G. A. Pocock's methodological writings on political languages, is somewhat misleading, since it presupposes that the pure, consistent, therefore ideal forms of the political languages (primarily used by Pocock as heuristic tools of analysis) are observable on the level of real, existing political discourses.

The complex approach used in the book, i.e., the detailed examination of a given, well-defined "event" (in this case, the 1751 Diet) as an object of study from several perspectives, has the advantage of allowing the validation of several aspects at the same time, which gives us a complex picture of the object under study. This allows new contexts to emerge that have not been explored in previous research. Tangible examples of this can be found in the book, both at the level of the details and at the level of the overall picture and in terms of the interrelationships between aspects that have not been researched/discussed in such detail before. It is partly due to this complex approach that Nagy successfully carries out the task he undertook in his work, namely, to examine the diet not in its abstract institutional structure, but in operation, adopting the approach of István Szijártó's long-term project on the eighteenth-century history of the Diet.

In doing so, Nagy successfully eliminates the biases and normative elements of earlier interpretations and transcends traditional historical narratives built primarily on the national-independence *versus* Habsburg-imperial colonialism and privilege-fearing narrowness *versus* socially just, "progressivist" pairs of

opposites. Of course, this is obviously also possible because, first, he can build on the intellectual tools and findings of the more current research on the history of the diet (above all the research of István M. Szijártó) and, second, the issues related to the eighteenth-century diets and, more broadly, to the political struggles between the estates in Hungary and the Habsburg central power are no longer of direct relevance to the political and social debates of the present. This latter circumstance does not mean, however, that contemporary research on the early modern Diet is not at all motivated by tendencies in the present. One such international trend is to interpret early modern diets as the forerunners of modern parliamentarism and as the seeds of the modern representative system. János Nagy's monograph explicitly resonates with this trend, but at the same time, it seeks primarily to provide a picture of the parliament that is as close as possible to the interpretative framework of the contemporary actors and the interests and principles that drove them.

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