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**Some Historiographical and Methodological Issues of
20th Century Hungarian Biography Writing**

Pro&Contra

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a concise overview of some historiographical and methodological issues concerning the composition of the political biography of Vitéz Emil Borbély-Maczky (1887–1945).

In the first part of my paper, I present some major accomplishments of 20th-century biography writing in Hungary, briefly covering the methodological context in respect of political biography vs. total biography. In the second part, I investigate the problems and opportunities of genre classification emerging during the composition of Emil Borbély-Maczky's biography by presenting available sources.

The primary goal of this paper is to set the biography of the most important public figure in interwar Borsod County into the context of 20th century Hungarian historical biographies.

Keywords: biography, Hungarian historiography, 20th century, Emil Borbély-Maczky

Additions to a biography in progress

The present study aims to provide an overview of the emerging methodological and historiographical issues and dilemmas regarding biography writing.¹ The relevance of this topic is related to my doctoral dissertation in progress, which presents vitéz² Emil Borbély-Maczky (1887–1945), who was the Head of County (főispán) of Borsod for several years. Since my research on writing his biography is to be completed soon, it is worth considering the dilemma of what type of biography is to be created.

Antecedents and frameworks

Writing a biography (writing down the life of a person, cf. life writing) has been of fundamental importance over the past centuries, especially from the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, when there was an increasingly sharper distinction between literary and historical biographies. The latter produced significant and relevant works.

¹ The writing of this study was supported by the tender titled EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00001. "Kutatási kapacitások és szolgáltatások komplex fejlesztése az Eszterházy Károly Egyetemen (The Complex Development of Research and Services Capacities at Eszterházy Károly University)".

² The title "vitéz" is a Hungarian order of merit awarded as a state honor between 1920 and 1944.

Gyula Szekfű's two monographs on Ferenc Rákóczi and Gábor Bethlen, both outstanding accomplishments of modern biography writing are notable examples.³

For several years after the Second World War, a watershed occurred in the evolution of Hungarian history writing – involving biography writing – when every area of life in Hungary saw gradual and radical reforms and Sovietization. Accordingly, history writing had to fully serve the Marxist ideology, and Hungarian history writing, which had great traditions and which was also gaining increasing renown in the West in the first half of the 20th century, was reformed from this new historico-political perspective. These large-scale reforms broke the careers of complete generations of historians or diverted them from their paths into a new direction. The aim was to rewrite Hungarian history grounded in Marxist-Communist theory and to sever every connection with the traditions and values of the former era. Regarding history writing, relief, change, and professionalization only occurred after the death of Stalin, and the loss of power of Mátyás Rákosi and his circle at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. It was then that the former ideological conceptualization of history writing gradually changed, its framework extended, and, as a result, a slow reformation of Hungarian historiography could take place.

This era is also characterized by the professionalization of biography writing, and Tibor Hajdu's biography on Mihály Károlyi and György Borsányi's on Béla Kun⁴ emerged as the first examples. Although the latter was quickly banned, the Károlyi and Kun biographies revealed a form of life writing, which came to be seen as the birth of the genre of political biography in Hungarian history writing. The life stories that the two authors told had already been written of by previous biographers. However, they narrowed their focus to examining the relationship between the individual and the political. In the more than five-hundred-page monograph by Hajdu, Mihály Károlyi is portrayed as a representative, a politician, Prime Minister, the first President of the Hungarian People's Republic, and a significant person of interwar emigration; the fact that Mihály Károlyi was a member of one of the most ancient aristocratic families and a husband is of little importance. Hajdu's biography is a classic political biography, which presents the events of Hungarian political history after the turn of the century through the person of Mihály Károlyi. Moreover, Hajdu reveals his reasons for this in the introductory thoughts to the book:

³ Gyula Szekfű, *A szárműzött Rákóczi* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1913), Gyula Szekfű, *Bethlen Gábor* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1929).

⁴ Tibor Hajdu: *Károlyi Mihály. Politikai életrajz* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1978), György Borsányi: *Kun Béla* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1978). In 1979 the latter book was published in cloth binding by Kossuth Kiadó, too.

In the biography of Mihály Károlyi, it is not necessary to separate the private person from the political personality, since unlike many of his fellow politicians, he did not implement public activities to achieve individual goals; on the contrary, he was ready to sacrifice his private interests in the name of his conviction at any time. I only deal with his peculiar personality as long as it is necessary to understand his unique career... The first three decades that formed his personality is only highlighted when it is crucial to understand the other Mihály Károlyi, the one that the country and the world got to know.⁵

György Borsányi's work provided readers with a plethora of little-known material concerning the public career of Béla Kun. There is a detailed description of the early years of the Hungarian labor movement, the effects of Russian bolshevism and revolution, the foundation of the Party of Communists in Hungary, and the era of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 (*Republic of Councils in Hungary*) all told through the lens of Béla Kun's life history. Also, in the second part of the Béla Kun book, the activities of the Hungarian communist emigration unfold – and via the Béla Kun case – a glimpse of the inner life of the Stalinist Soviet Union is provided.

In the 1990s the biographies of further important historical figures were written, all of which belong to the category of political biography. In 1991 Ignác Romsics's monograph on István Bethlen was published by Magyarorsággkutató Intézet (*Hungarian Studies Research Institute*) and subsequently by other publishers.⁶ The author chose a main character, whose life and activities were hotly debated during the era between the two world wars, and which would be portrayed by later historians as wholly negative. Romsics emphasizes in the preface of his book that

His [István Bethlen] followers and political friends, for example his first biographers, Dénes Sebess and Miklós Surányi or the leading historian of the era, Gyula Szekfű, considered him an outstanding statesman and compared him to István Széchenyi. However, his opponents, for example, Dezső Szabó or the representatives of the left-wing democracy saw him as a cunning, petty Transylvanian count, who was only good at tactics and corruption. At the end of the 1940's and in the 1950's, when the label of fascism was stuck on Hungarian politics between the two world wars, without any differentiation István Bethlen was also automatically put in the fascist, semi-fascist camp.⁷

⁵ Hajdu, *Károlyi Mihály*, 7.

⁶ Ignác Romsics, *Bethlen István. Politikai életrajz* (Budapest: Magyarorsággkutató Intézet, 1991).

⁷ Romsics, *Bethlen István*, 5.

It was precisely this incomplete and subjective historiography of István Bethlen, which motivated Ignác Romsics to undertake a more objective study, in which he reveals István Bethlen's political career shorn of ideology and prejudice. The monograph, similar to Tibor Hajdu's and György Borsányi's, primarily focused on István Bethlen as Prime Minister and as an outstanding figure of the conservative-nationalist doctrine. However, it is important to note that the author defined the concept of political biography in a broader sense, since he introduced the main character's family background, marriage, habits, and life circumstances in more detail than earlier biographies did. Therefore, while Romsics's Bethlen portrays one of the greatest politicians of the 20th century, he also gives an impression of almost half a century of history. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the subjects of both works were considered as being niche. That is, on the one hand, the picture of Bethlen was strongly influenced by the ideological limits of the second half of the 20th century, but on the other, a professional and objective political historical investigation of the era between the two world wars was yet to be undertaken.

Another watershed in the historiography of Hungarian historical biography, was János M. Rainer's political biography of Imre Nagy⁸. The two-volume work has much in common with Ignác Romsics's monograph of István Bethlen. Like Bethlen, Imre Nagy was not generally regarded as a prominent historical figure. The reasons for this were connected to the then contemporary political and ideological climate, which could only be resolved slowly. Unlike Bethlen, – who despite having the stigma of being a fascist was included in the historical works of the second half of the 20th century – Imre Nagy became a victim of silence due to an official policy of effacement. When at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, Rainer undertook the task of writing a biography of Imre Nagy, his motivation may have been to fill this historiographical omission. Although the author categorized his work as a political biography, similar to Ignác Romsics's, he portrayed his main character as a complex personality and this allowed the reader to become acquainted with Imre Nagy, the man behind the politician. This is partly because Rainer was able to engage in conversation with a living relative: Imre Nagy's daughter, Erzsébet Nagy. Moreover, as he noted in the preface, there were numerous memoirs available in the archives of the Oral History Archives of the Institute of 1956 (*1956-os Intézet Oral History Archívum*), which is a special resource. However, even though Rainer did explore the human character of Nagy, it was the politician that was portrayed in the book. Although the Imre Nagy biography pushes the limits of the genre, it was not because of this that the monograph is regarded as a remarkable accomplishment of 20th-century Hungarian historiography. Instead, it is because István Tóth, the first reviewer of the biography, emphasized that “it contributed

⁸ János M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz. I–II*. (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996–1999).

to the realistic judgement of Imre Nagy's lifework and respectfully immortalized it as well as it redeemed a lot that the Hungarian science of history indebted to him."⁹

The next chronologically significant biography, which belongs within the framework of political biographies, is a two-volume Miklós Kozma monograph written by Mária Ormos.¹⁰ Ormos began her lengthy research after she had established herself as a significant historian and gained substantial recognition. Unlike in the case of the examples mentioned so far, her interest was not in a personality of mainstream politics, but a man who achieved great acclaim while working in the background. Miklós Kozma was not only an MP and one of the leaders of the Race Defender Movement, but a Minister of the Interior, the Regent's Commissioner of Kárpátalja (*Subcarpathia*) as well as the reformer of the Hungarian Telegraph Office and the leader of Hungarian Radio. Thus, the author did not choose a globally significant political figure as the main character of her study, but a man who, although a member of the political elite during the era between the two world wars, was most certainly not on the frontline. The contrast is even sharper if we add that at the turn of the Millennium, Hungarian historical writing did not have a biography of Miklós Horthy nor many of the country's Prime Ministers, either. Therefore, the novelty of the work by Ormos may have in part been as a result of the relative anonymity of Miklós Kozma. On the other hand, he is a strong subject: Kozma liked to write, thus he left behind an extraordinarily rich documentary heritage consisting of numerous diaries, notes, and letters. Few historians had dealt with the source material prior to Ormos, and nobody had undertaken the task of writing and publishing an entire review, a situation the authors of former biographies could only have dreamed of. Thus any author attempting Kozma's biography had the luxury of being able to ignore biography writing traditions, and instead of a political biography could provide a more complex overview of Miklós Kozma. It was this situation that Ormos partly exploited as she highlighted in her introduction:

On the following pages I will touch upon public history only to a minor extent, and I will put more emphasis on our hero and the way of thinking and acting of his friends, naturally taking into consideration how the significant figures and milestone events of the era were seen through his eyes.¹¹

⁹ István Tóth, "Rainer M. János: Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz," *Múltunk*, no. 2 (1997): 306.

¹⁰ Mária Ormos, *Egy magyar médiavezér: Kozma Miklós. Pokoljárás a médiában és a politikában, 1919–1941. Volume I–II*. (Budapest: PolgART, 2000).

¹¹ Mária Ormos, *Egy magyar médiavezér: Kozma Miklós*, Vol. I., 15.

The author intended to follow this principle throughout the two volumes. There were relatively few documents left detailing Miklós Kozma's family and youth, thus the character of Kozma as a soldier and counter-revolutionary in his early thirties is presented after a comparatively brief overview. Subsequently, there is a more substantial description of Kozma the politician, the minister, the businessman, and the media director. Ormos attempted to exploit the documentary heritage, which enables the reader to learn much about Kozma's thinking. It is primarily a picture of Hungary between the two world wars, complemented with portraits of prominent politicians and leaders as Miklós Kozma saw them. Despite this, although Ormos did not write a classical political biography, it can still be considered an example of this genre.

János Kádár was the subject of the next Hungarian historical biography written in a similar vein.¹² The two-volume bibliography can be regarded a novelty in the history of Hungarian biography writing. Tibor Huszár was essentially a sociologist; however, at the beginning of his career he also studied psychology, and therefore had the opportunity to extend the traditional framework of biography writing by integrating contributions drawn from multiple disciplines. It must be added here that the author predetermined the genre of the biography; moreover, the concept of political biography appears straightforward in the title as well. It also contributed to the novelty of this work that the author – unlike earlier biographers – was a contemporary of the main character under investigation:

This can be beneficial, too: sharing the illusions of the reform-communists for a long time, from inside and still with a distance, I had the opportunity to get to know and practice the distinct way of speaking and thinking of the era. However, the advantages of these prove to be a trap... Censorship operated and the important decisions were made behind closed curtains. Albeit critical social science and arts – in particular in the late Kádár era – revealed many mysteries that we could see and hear still it was not identical to what really had happened and what we faced while investigating highly confidential and manipulated documents.¹³

Although the author was aware of the risk of bias deriving from personal involvement and empathy, still – especially in the second volume – he foregoes a critical stance on several occasions. The first volume is essentially about Kádár's family background, childhood socialization, and his early years in the communist movement. While studying this era, Huszár utilizes the methods of social psychology and political sociology in at-

¹² Tibor Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza, 1912–1956. Volume 1.* (Budapest: Szabad Tér – Kossuth, 2001); Tibor Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza, 1957. november – 1989. június. Volume 2.* (Budapest: Szabad Tér – Kossuth, 2003).

¹³ Tibor Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza, 1912–1956.* Vol. 1., 5–6.

tempting to reconstruct the early phases of Kádár's life. He analyzes interviews and memoirs along with archival resources and attempts to resolve anomalies stemming from these sources. However, the unity and continuity are shattered in the second volume due to the time that passed between the publication of the two volumes. Although during János Kádár's life a new chapter began in November 1956, an even more momentous era than that which preceded it, the biography transforms back into a public historical description. In the Miklós Kozma biography the portrayal of him as a businessman is also present; however, there is less and less focus on his everyday life, his thinking, and opinions. As a result, although this János Kádár biography was the first to investigate perhaps the most significant historical figure in Hungarian history, Tibor Huszár's two-volume work became nothing more than a public history description.

The photo tableau comprising the political portraits of the featuring characters of our recent historical past is similar to the one of a graduating secondary-school class. You cannot retouch the "bad guys" and you do not know the future career path of the young man smiling in the graduation photo tableau... Regarding the key figures of "high politics," however, the case is different. As though the historians walked on hidden, unexploded mines, even if they try to reconstruct their political career grounded on sources and resources without pathos and passion. Because usually posterity either requires a historical justice, which can also be called "rehabilitation," or it would like to pull down and subsequently "punish" the historical figure set on pedestal till then.¹⁴

The above extract is taken from the preface of Jenő Gergely's monograph on Gyula Gömbös. They are the remarks of a historian, who produced works on several historical figures (among others: Ottokár Prohászka, Sándor Giesswein, or Béla Bangha) prior to Gömbös. Later he explains why he considered it essential to reveal these thoughts at the beginning of his work:

Nowadays historians, journalists, and politicians dealing with the era between 1918 and 1945 put the leaders of the quarter-century hallmarked by Horthy's name into the following two camps: the now "presentable" Bethlen-Teleki-Kállay camp, and the retrograde, proved-to-be-guilty camp of those causing failure, which would have started with Gyula Gömbös and would have continued with Béla Imrédy, László Bárdossy, and finished with the Arrow Cross dictator Ferenc Szálasi... Gyula Gömbös, whose political career I follow in this book, was a unique and distinct phenomenon of the political elite of Hungary between the two world wars. It was a phenomenon to which nobody was indifferent neither in his life nor after his

¹⁴ Jenő Gergely, *Gömbös Gyula. Politikai pályakép* (Budapest: Vince, 2001), 7.

death. People either liked Gömbös, some even worshipped him, but, at the same time, from the “other side” even his contemporaries regarded him not simply as an opponent but an enemy. Posterity declared him as the main offender in the sins of an entire era and a whole regime.¹⁵

Thus Jenő Gergely chose a difficult subject for his biography of a distinctive individual active between the two world wars.¹⁶ It is precisely because of this investigation of the Gömbös image and phenomenon that this biography is located within the genre of the biographies already discussed here. Gergely did not analyze and interpret the complexities of his main character. He briefly presented his family background and adolescent socialization, and then switched to the public life of Gömbös’ career, detailing his transformation from a soldier into a public person. He presented his portrait of Gömbös in five large units each presenting an important stage in the politician’s life: counter-revolutionary, governing party politician, opposition politician, minister, and Prime Minister. The highlight of the monograph in terms of novelty was the last chapter in which the author focused on his main character’s contemporary evaluation, political heritage, and persistence in the memory of posterity in more detail than previous biographies.

Almost fifteen years after the Gergely monograph, József Vonyó’s Gömbös biography was published by Napvilág Publishing House (*Napvilág Kiadó*).¹⁷ In which the main character’s assessment and influence on future generations as well as his political career also played a significant role. Compared to Jenő Gergely’s work, József Vonyó devoted more time to his subject’s background and personality. His family, home village, youth and then later the background to certain decisions are foregrounded, achieving the goal formulated by the author in the preface:

We not only want to present Gömbös’s thoughts and his activities that motivated him. Above all, we wish to understand. We intend to apprehend why he uttered the particular words, why he chose the particular actions in a particular situation; what urged him to get into a powerful position at all costs; and how he handled that when he had already possessed it. That is, we are more interested in the “why” than in the “what.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Gergely, *Gömbös Gyula*, 7–8.

¹⁶ It may not be unintentional that unlike in earlier biographies, the author reported the current stage of his research not only in studies but two years prior to the publication of the big monograph, he published a brief version; that is an outline. In this work the author mainly formulated questions and proposed problems, around which he is to build up the forthcoming biography. For more detail see: Jenő Gergely, *Gömbös Gyula. Vázlat egy politikai életrajzhoz* (Budapest: Elektra Kiadóház, 1999).

¹⁷ József Vonyó, *Gömbös Gyula* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2014),

¹⁸ Vonyó, *Gömbös Gyula*, 11.

This approach, however, does not lead to the direction of writing a total biography, instead the author undertakes to analyze and present Gömbös's life path in a different way. He predetermined his work by saying: "The title of this could have even been: Gyula Gömbös and Power."¹⁹ In the era between the two world wars, the next prominent politician to become the subject of a biographical work was Pál Teleki.²⁰ There were several Teleki biographies already available at the turn of the Millennium; Balázs Ablonczy was not introducing a new character into the discourse. This, however, was not necessarily to the advantage of the author, since over the decades numerous rumors and stories had emerged about Pál Teleki, and each had to be investigated so that Ablonczy could produce an objective synthesis. Accordingly, unlike former biographies, he chose to introduce his work with an extensive and detailed historiographical review. By doing this, he reviewed and condensed all the images of Teleki that had been constructed over the years as well as providing a thorough review of the literature of the antecedent events, through which could be observed not only the changes in the Teleki portrait but it also made it possible to follow the main tendencies of 20th-century Hungarian history writing and the continuous development of public thinking. This extensive review is of professionally accurate and outstanding quality. Subsequently, the main character is depicted as a complex personality. Pál Teleki did not merely pursue a political career but engaged in public life in many other guises. Therefore, the author had to introduce not only Teleki the politician but also the scientist, the teacher, and the participant in several social movements and organizations. These were roles he engaged in fully, and as a result, beyond the complex person the reader is provided with an overview of the fields related to him. Although in this biography the political, public, and social roles are the main focal points, the author also provided information on Teleki's personality and in doing so he deviated somewhat from the conventions of political biographies. As Miklós Zeidler, who produced a fairly detailed and accurate review on the monograph, wrote: "In Ablonczy's book Teleki struggles and contemplates, is enthusiastic and disheartened, prideful and empathic, advised and sudden, fair and unfair, honest and mendacious, victorious and frail – a man."²¹ Balázs Ablonczy, based on his extensive research wrote a dense and precise monograph, which reveals the real Pál Teleki in all his complexity.

In Hungarian historiography the first decade of the new millennium passed without the writing of a biography of any significant 20th-century historical figures, like Miklós

¹⁹ Vonyó, *Gömbös Gyula*, 11.

²⁰ Balázs Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál* (Budapest: Osiris, 2005).

²¹ Miklós Zeidler, "Olvasónapló. Gondolatok Ablonczy Balázs Teleki Pál című könyvéről," *Limes* 25, no. 2 (2012): 142. For the whole review see: pp. 109–146.

Horthy. Although the era named after him was studied by historians from many perspectives, for a very long time no biography was produced that displayed both scientific exactitude and objectivity. This all changed when a young and talented historian, Dávid Turbucz published his biography in 2011 after several years of research.²² His Horthy biography has also been published in an extended version since then. Turbucz conducted research into Horthy's life and in addition, his biography is "based on a wide selection of published documents and relevant literature available and undertakes to provide a scientific, informative, brief, and easy to understand overview of Miklós Horthy's life and activities as Head of State."²³ There is a discrepancy among the different portrayals of Horthy, and a good example of this can be evidenced in the preface to the biography, where the short reviews of Bálint Hóman and Erzsébet Andics can be read in succession. This preface demonstrates that a biographer of Horthy must synthesize extreme views – the results of which are complemented with his own research – as well as portraying it as a story. From the point of view of the present historiographic overview, the work of Turbucz treads a timeworn path, that is, it primarily investigates the relationship between the individual and the political which it foregrounds. Horthy's private sphere only appears in the background to reveal his motivation for certain decisions. Although the author provided a brief description of the family history and Horthy's youth, still these are not dominant parts of the biography. Similar examples are when Turbucz wrote about two events when the role of the father and the Head of State became inseparable. On August 20th, 1942, his son, István Horthy's plane crashed, of which the governor learnt on the same day. The author writes that Miklós Horthy, an elderly man was physically devastated by his son's death, but acted as a statesman and governor without delay. Similarly, Turbucz investigates the death of István Horthy from the perspective of the vice-governor institution and the later cult and propaganda. In a similar vein, the governor objectively recorded the kidnapping of his only living child, too. He wrote how the Gestapo entrapped Miklós Horthy Jr. and how an SS-commando caught the boy under the leadership of Otto Skorzeny. Furthermore, he continued with a discussion of the failed Hungarian attempt to change sides in the war. However, in the biography nothing is revealed about how this serious disaster influenced the governor, and what he thought in that particular situation. In light of the

²² Dávid Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2011). The new extended issue: Dávid Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2014)

²³ Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós*, 12.

above, Turbucz's Horthy biography can be located within the genre of political biography similar to the biographies of István Bethlen, Imre Nagy, János Kádár, and others.

Although, to a certain extent all of the above authors attempted to extend the framework of the genre of political biography, it was György Kövér's monograph of Géza Losonczy, which discarded the conventions of Hungarian historical biography writing.²⁴ György Kövér, when discussing the creation of the Losonczy biography, writes:

I did not attempt to write a "political biography" about Géza Losonczy, which is fashionable in Hungary but a so-called "total biography." It is not because a politician is also a man, but first of all, because I thought that being a politician cannot be interpreted from the perspective of political-history reductionism. The actions of a politician cannot be explained without the knowledge of his social origin, milieu, and leeway, and in a similar vein, without the exploration of his career motives and characteristic features, it cannot be solved why a person made a particular decision in a particular situation.²⁵

Furthermore, he claimed in the Losonczy monograph that:

We intend to regard "total" biography, which comprises character and career, as exemplary. We aim to sum up the wholeness of the history of personality and life-roles. Therefore, we could not undertake to limit the biography neither from a political nor from a psychological perspective.²⁶

Therefore, György Kövér wished neither to present the relationship between the person and the political nor to outline a form of contemporary history through the main character of the monograph, but he was primarily interested in the changes Géza Losonczy's personality and ideas went through at certain stages of his life. This leaves us with the question as to what kind of biography the author wrote then. How can you classify a biography which separates itself both from the definition of political biography and the traditions of Hungarian history writing regarding life writing? Kövér offered a possible genre category coining the term "total biography," which transcends the political and historical reductionism of political biographies and psychohistorical biographies. He aims to maintain a certain balance between the two and therefore the biography becomes a blend

²⁴ György Kövér, *Losonczy Géza, 1917–1957*. (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1998).

²⁵ György Kövér, *Biográfia és társadalomtörténet* (Budapest: Osiris, 2014), 9–10.

²⁶ Kövér, *Losonczy Géza, 1917–1957*, 85.

of political history macro analysis, social history, microhistory, and psychoanalysis.²⁷ With his novel approach, the application of exact and complex sources and his use of theory, Kövér introduced a new approach to Hungarian history writing. He not only enriched historiography with this particular outstanding biography, but also tackled what had been a serious theoretical problem in previous biographical works. Kövér, then, was probably the first to produce a systematic and widespread overview and interpretation.²⁸

“The earlier volumes about János Kádár primarily discussed his political career or appreciated him; however, this book is about the ordinary János Kádár,” writes György Majtényi in the introduction to his book on the Hungarian politician.²⁹ Then he continues: “For me and for everybody this work is supplementary and fills a niche – the aim is to understand and change the Kádár image, if it is possible.”³⁰ That is, the author did not produce a classical biography but intended to present his career and life trajectory in detail, and thus put major emphasis on the man who is the focal point of his work. The everyday life of János Kádár, where he lived, what he ate, his attitude towards his environment, and the habits he had are presented to the reader. The history of events and his political career appear merely as complementary threads in his portrayal. Majtényi investigated Kádár in

²⁷ György Kövér wrote extensively on the Losonczy monograph and through its example on the methodology of life writing: first in the Losonczy biography and then in two shorter theoretical works (György Kövér, “Biográfia és történetírás,” *Aetas* 15, no. 3 (2000): 150–156.; György Kövér, “A biográfia nehézségei,” *Aetas* 17, no. 2–3 (2002): 245–262.), and finally in the methodological work based on his own experience and on the above studies: Kövér, *Biográfia és társadalomtörténet*, passim. See also Gábor Gyáni, “Tragédia két felvonásban. A kommunista identitás metamorfózisai,” in *Emlékezés, emlékezet és a történelem elbeszélése*, by Gábor Gyáni (Budapest: Napvilág, 2000), 161–175.

²⁸ In the present study – due to space constraints – does not undertake to present and analyze in detail the theoretical works on the methodology of biography writing, in addition to the previously cited works I only cite a few that deemed remarkable examples of international and developing Hungarian historiography: Giovanni Levi, “Az életrajz használatáról,” trans. Gábor Czoch, *Korall*, no. 2. (Winter 2000): 81–93.; Ágnes Botond, *Pszichobistoria – avagy a lélek történetiségének tudománya* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1991); William McKinley Runyan, “Vita a pszichobiográfiáról,” in *Történeti és politikai pszichológia*, ed. György Hunyady (Budapest: Osiris, 1998), 305–340.; a thematic issue of the journal: *Clio & Psyche. Korall*, no. 21–22. (November 2005); Mihály Lackó, *Széchenyi elájul. Pszichotörténeti tanulmányok* (Budapest: L’ Harmattan, 2001); William Todd Schultz, ed., *Handbook of Psychobiography* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Pierre Bourdieu, “Az életrajzi illúzió,” in Pierre Bourdieu, *A gyakorlati észjárás. A társadalmi cselekvés elméletéről*, trans. Balázs Berkovits (Budapest: Napvilág, 2002), 68–77.; Patrice Gueniffey, “A biográfia a megújuló politikatörténetben,” trans. Csilla Szabó, *Aetas* 15, no. 3 (2000): 136–149.

²⁹ György Majtényi, *Vezérsel. Kádár János mindennapjai*. (Budapest: Libri–Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 2012), 8.

³⁰ Majtényi, *Vezérsel. Kádár János mindennapjai*, 8.

three contexts: home and private sphere; office and work; and everything else. When the monograph was published, it was regarded as a seminal accomplishment and it is exactly because of its uniqueness and novelty that this work is viewed as exceptional from among the many thick and multi-volume biographies.

Finally, some thoughts will be offered on László Karsai's Szálasi biography. Karsai undertook to write the biography of Ferenc Szálasi, perhaps the most reviled and hated character in 20th-century Hungarian history. Prior to Karsai it was only Rudolf Paksa who had attempted to write about the personality of Szálasi, the Arrow Cross leader, from the perspective of his career and life. The young historian had investigated the history of the extreme right, and published an informative micro-monograph with scientific exactitude, detailing Szálasi's life and his "legacy."³¹ The four most significant topics of Paska's biography are as follows. 1. the military years, during which he not only attracted followers but also made valuable connections. This was also the period in which his ideology and philosophy developed in response to various experiences he underwent. 2. He also dealt with the politician and ideologist, who – while gradually distancing himself from the governing party and building the Hungarian extreme right camp (he builds a cult, a cult is built) – often had to fight for his own survival. That is, as the leader of the Party of National Will and the later Hungarist Movement, as well as the author of various political pamphlets, he managed to attract the constant attention of the authorities. Therefore, he had to remain a powerful person during the period of legal proceedings against him and the time he spent in prison. 3. Paksa also dealt with Szálasi as the leader of the nation, who did everything to become the head of the nation. During his brief reign he led the nation he was responsible for deeper and deeper into political, economic, and moral quagmire. 4. The author also touches upon Szálasi, the war criminal, whose judgment deserted him following his brief career as Hungarian leader. As a result, the cult of personality that had emerged around him waned and he became public-enemy number one. Thus, Paksa provided an overview of Ferenc Szálasi's political journey, locating the soldier, politician, and ideologist at the center of his work. Consequently, he only briefly mentioned the most momentous events of Szálasi's private life (birth, family, origin, and marriage).

In contrast to Rudolf Paksa, László Karsai presented the results of his extensive research in his extensive biography published in 2016.³² Similar to the Hungarian biographical classics, he indicated in the subtitle that his monograph's primary aim was to present Szálasi's public career in detail. However, it is revealed in the introduction that the author

³¹ Rudolf Paksa, *Szálasi Ferenc és a hungarizmus* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2013).

³² László Karsai, *Szálasi Ferenc. Politikai életrajz* (Budapest: Balassi, 2016).

interpreted the biography genre in a broader sense. Unlike Miklós Horthy, János Kádár, István Bethlen, or Imre Nagy, Ferenc Szálasi influenced the fate of the country for but a few months. As Karsai writes:

A Hitler or Stalin biography can also be the history of the Nazi Germany or the Bolshevik Soviet Union at the same time. Concerning Szálasi's political career, it can be stated that he merely looked forward to seizing power from the 1930s.³³

Therefore, the author did not (or could not) narrow the focus of his monograph to merely Szálasi's career in public life, as Rudolf Paksa had already published an excellent summary of this period. Karsai's aim was to investigate and analyze the man. He wished to determine how Szálasi, one of the children of a deprived family with complex origins, could go on to become the leader of a nation, a war criminal, and one of the most reviled historical figures in public discourse. The fact that it was not only him but also Szálasi's contemporaries who were interested in this issue is demonstrated in a letter written by Hugó Payr to Miklós Horthy in 1938, and which is cited by Karsai, also:

How has this otherwise unremarkable captain become a significant factor of present day Hungarian political life? Since he cannot make speeches or write, he does not have press, nor party, nor the ability of party leading; moreover, he does not even have clear thoughts, either.³⁴

The merit of Karsai's biography is that it presents a life trajectory from which a realistic Szálasi image can be created. The space afforded by the monograph genre allowed Karsai to cover relevant areas of Szálasi's private life in depth, like the issues of his origins, family background, and even his relationship with his wife. Furthermore, Szálasi's motivations are also examined (for example, why he chose a political life, which was less stable than that of his former military career). Thus, although Karsai categorized his work as a political biography, his investigation was on Ferenc Szálasi as a complex individual, and focused on his dominant role in public life as well as some more pertinent aspects of his private life and personality. The investigation of this dimension of Ferenc Szálasi's character is important because of his influence on posterity. That is, Rudolf Paksa and László Karsai took the attributes (madman, prophet, martyr, demagogue) which were primarily appended to him by historians as points of reference.

³³ Karsai, *Szálasi Ferenc*, 9.

³⁴ Karsai, *Szálasi Ferenc*, 10.

Emil Borbély-Maczky – political or total biography?

Emil Borbély-Maczky was born in Heves on September 6th, 1887. His father, Emil Maczky, Sr., pursued a successful career in public administration in Heves County (*vármegye*). He was an assistant sheriff (*segédszolgabíró*), a sheriff (*főszolgabíró*), and then served two terms as an MP in the early 20th century. His mother, Róza Fáy of Fáj, was a descendant of one of the most ancient aristocratic families in the region and, on her mother's side she was related to the Borbély family of Léva. Of his siblings the older, György Maczky, had a successful career in public service, which was cut short by his premature death. His younger brother, Béla Maczky, also worked for the County, but had an unexceptional career partly due to his taking early retirement.

In 1902 Borbély-Maczky began a military career and gradually moved up the ranks. He fought as a member of the National Defense Hussar Regiment Nr. 9 of Marosvásárhely during the First World War. Except for a few weeks between August 1914 and December 1917, he was a constant presence on the frontlines (first the Eastern frontline, then the Transylvanian stage, and finally the Italian frontline). In 1919 he retired from the military in order to follow the family tradition of a career in public administration. He was MP for the town of Ózd between 1920 and 1922 and then for the town of Miskolc between 1926 and 1930. In 1922-1923 and subsequently between 1930 and 1944 he was the County Head (*főispán*) of one of the largest counties, Borsod County, in Hungary. Emil Borbély-Maczky and Gyula Gömbös were best friends; moreover, their careers took the same direction until Gömbös's death in 1936. The strength of their friendship is perhaps best illustrated with the following: 1. When Gyula Gömbös and Gábor Bethlen ended their political relationship, Borbély-Maczky resigned from his position as Head of County (1923). 2. Borbély-Maczky joined Gömbös's Race Defender Movement early on. After the formation of the Race Defender Party in 1924, he was its unsuccessful nominee in the interim elections in the town of Miskolc and then, in the General Election of 1926 he was successful as an Race Defender nominee. 3. The Hungarian National Service People Association was a mutual forum for Gömbös and Borbély-Maczky, and after Gömbös' resignation in 1928 Borbély-Maczky became president of the Association. 4. When Gömbös returned to the Unified Party, his friend Borbély-Maczky followed him. While Gömbös was appointed as a secretary of state and then as a minister, Borbély-Maczky became the leader of his beloved Borsod County again. 5. In the 1930s the media reported on several occasions that Gömbös facilitated Borbély-Maczky's career progression. First, he appeared as the applicant for the position of superintendent of Budapest, later his name emerged as secretary of state for the Ministry of Defense, minister for the Home Office, and the Ministry of Defense. 6. They often met in their private lives, too. In Borbély-Maczky's mansion in Bóta, there was a furnished room maintained

for the exclusive use of Gömbös. This close relationship ended with the death of the Prime Minister in 1936; however, Borbély-Maczky continued to advance his career. The inhabitants of Borsod County acknowledged and admired their Head of County and his colleagues respected him, but at the same time they were somewhat in fear of him. His superiors acknowledged him and gave him a free hand. In 1939 he became a mobilization commissioner and then one for public supply. In 1944 he was appointed the Head of County of the Municipality of Miskolc. He was the leader of Borsod County until the Arrows seized power and removed him from his position. Subsequently, he returned to his home in Bóta. He was regarded as *persona non grata* by the Arrows, the Soviets, and then by the newly consolidated state power, too. The old Borbély-Maczky was considered their hated enemy. He was arrested twice and, on the second occasion in the spring of 1945, he died under mysterious circumstances. His death was not investigated then nor later and various stories circulated about his fate among the inhabitants of Miskolc and the surrounding settlements. However, the new regime soon declared the former Head of County an enemy. He was considered an undesirable and soon faded from public consciousness. Even local historians ignored him and his career. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s he was occasionally mentioned in local historical works. Efforts by authorities to condemn him to obscurity appeared to succeed meaning Emil Borbély-Maczky had no influence on posterity. Furthermore, since he did not have any children, and most of his nephews and nieces were exiled, there were no significant memories of him left in Hungary. He was remembered neither as a decorated soldier from the First World War nor as one of the prominent, outstanding figures of political and public service sector between the two world wars.

The above short biographical review reveals Borbély-Maczky's career, which although not well-known, influenced the political life of both Borsod County and the country for almost two and a half decades. His impact as well as the historiographic niche resulting from the change in the political and historiographic discourse of the second half of the 1940s are motivating factors to undertake the writing of a Borbély-Maczky biography.

The question is, however, whether in the case of Emil Borbély-Maczky it is possible to write a complete and detailed biography, as the political biography is only partly about the main character, albeit that is the central element. However, the contemporary milieu and era can be developed alongside the political theme. Concerning Borbély-Maczky, it is possible to touch upon the military events of the First World War, the political and social changes between 1918-1920, the operation of Hungarian Parliamentaryism between the two world wars, the activities of various social organizations (*MOVE*, *Frontbarcos Szövetség*/*Frontfighters Association* etc.), as well as the political economic, social, and cultural

circumstances of (the administratively united – temporarily) Borsod, Gömör, and Kishont Counties (from 1939 called Borsod County). All these together – alongside the exploration of a wealth of literature – could furnish a complete monograph, the title of which, following Hungarian historiographical conventions, could be: Emil Borbély-Maczky: A Political Biography.

The issue is whether the remaining and available resource base makes it possible to write a complex biography, one not only restricted to the relationship between the individual and the political. Although according to Giovanni Levi, when writing the life story of a person “the lack of sources and resources is not the only and not even the main difficulty,”³⁵ still it predetermines the limits and the framework of the biography in question. To be able to investigate the person, his/her ideas, mentality, decision-making, and feelings, and to conjure the image of a complete personality or at least to extend the limits of the political biography genre, it is also crucial to have subjective sources and resources through which it is possible to uncover the layers of the main character or at least to draw conclusions. Such sources and resources can be, for example, contemporaneous memoirs (see János M. Rainer and Imre Nagy), the author’s personal experience (see Tibor Huszár and János Kádár) or the subject’s propensity for writing, which would allow for the study of personal correspondence, articles, diaries, books, and studies (see Mária Ormos and Miklós Kozma). Regarding Emil Borbély-Maczky, none of the above sources are available. Since he did not have any lineal descendants, personal/family anecdotes could survive only in the memory of distant relatives if at all. In the case of Emil Borbély-Maczky there are some living relations, but due to their age at the time – most were 5-6 years old when their uncle, who lived several hundred kilometers away, was murdered – they have scarcely any personal memories. Still the family stories recounted to me are useful from the point of a biography, too, despite the fact that we cannot know their uncle’s philosophy or motivations for certain decisions, yet they can help construct a picture of him, which is grounded in how his family saw him and what kind of a man they considered him to be.

Similar to contemporary memoirs, there was no significant documentary heritage left by Emil Borbély-Maczky. The main reason for this is that he did not like writing and, in most cases, he expressed himself in speech. Despite his extensive relationships, he did not often correspond in writing. The exception was a brief period during the First World War. In August 1914 during his mobilization and front command he kept a diary, a copy of which can be found in the Military History Archives (*Hadtörténelmi Levéltár*). This appears to be the only period of his life from which his first-hand experiences survive. Despite his

³⁵ Levi, “Az életrajz használatáról,” 82.

entries being terse, it is possible to gain an insight into how he experienced the first weeks of the war. His diary also reveals that he was in regular correspondence with his fiancée, Erzsébet Pálinkás, who lived in Ákos. He also appears to have communicated on some occasions with his father and brothers. However, these letters, except for few pieces, are probably lost. Emese Kerkay, the daughter of Emil Borbély-Maczky's godson, believes the reason for this was the Soviet occupation and the ransacking of her uncle's mansion. According to the family, it was only a few days after the murder that the mansion at Bóta was robbed several times. Most of the contents were stolen and carried away, and his relatives were able to salvage only a few keepsakes. It is possible that any correspondence and documents – if they existed at all – were damaged during this time.

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20th-century Hungarian historiographical biographies, in particular those produced at the turn of the century, were of a high, scholarly quality. Over the decades defining personalities of the 20th century including Mihály Károlyi, Béla Kun, István Bethlen, Imre Nagy, Géza Losonczy, Miklós Kozma, János Kádár, Gyula Gömbös, Pál Teleki, and Ferenc Szálasi all had (in some cases two-volume) biographies dedicated to them. In addition, accessible and informative micro-monographs of a scholarly standard provided portraits of Gyula Gömbös (József Vonyó), of Miklós Horthy (Dávid Turbucz), and of Ferenc Szálasi (Rudolf Paksa). Giovanni Levi in his study (2000) poses the (poetic) question: “is it possible to write down a man's life?”³⁶ If one of the most significant problems, that is, a lack of sources and resources does not hinder the work of historians, then the biographies of figures of historical significance can still be written as the above examples demonstrate. Modern Hungarian historical biographies can be placed on a historiographical spectrum: at one end are the complete, complex biographies (i.e., the public sphere and private sphere are interpreted as both complementary and explanatory scenes); at the other one can find the political biographies with their focus firmly fixed on their subject's public role. Modern Hungarian historical life writing is essentially “politicocentric” encompassing both the subject and the milieu in which they operated.

The biography of Emil Borbély-Maczky, which is in the making, appears to be unable to escape the framework of political biography. There are no subjective sources nor resources available that shed light on the main character: there are no contemporary memoirs, the living members of the family have few personal memories, and therefore, it is impossible to “know” the person of Emil Borbély-Maczky. Documentary heritage, as

³⁶ Levi, “Az életrajz használatáról,” 82.

we know it today, has not survived. However, according to Levi, it is not a lack of documentary sources that poses the greatest difficulty in writing a person's life story, as the example of Emil Borbély-Maczky demonstrates, rather it is an absence of personal and subjective sources and resources that ultimately determines the genre categorization of the biography.

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