According to a widely accepted definition, Hungarus consciousness is the identity that characterised residents of Hungary, regardless of their ethnic and social differences, until the end of the eighteenth century.\(^1\) Hungarus consciousness, it is claimed, was destroyed by the emergence of nationalism. The Hungarus phenomenon is, of course, more complicated than this, but if we were to ask our fellow historians about the foundations of the Hungarus consciousness, the emergence of the term, and what else there is to be known about it, many of them—who have not dealt with some aspect of the question—would know little more than the above definition. In historical works—with the exception of a few specialist studies—Hungarus consciousness is mentioned far less often than in literary history. Nevertheless, the Hungarus phenomenon is very well known, although its name was slow to emerge in Hungarian historiography. It is, it must be admitted, difficult to fit into the historical narratives defined by national perspectives.

The Historiography of the Hungarus Phenomenon

It is no coincidence that those intellectuals who evoked the phenomenon in the 1930s and 40s were using it at the same time as a protest against the fascism of their age. Tibor Joó drew up the following schema: there existed a traditional, ancient Hungarian ‘nationalism,’ which the Hungarians brought with them from the world of the steppes. This ‘nationalism’ was the manifestation of the state-organising wisdom of the nomadic people. They were not concerned about language or ethnicity, since they were capable of mobilising the most diverse ethnic groups towards a common goal, just as the Huns, Avars and Khazars had, who may always have incorporated Hungarian-speaking

\(^1\) This is a shortened English version of the article “A ‘Hungarus-tudat’ a polgári-nemzeti átalakulás sodrában,” Magyar Kisebbség 17 (2012), 163–205. It was originally written as part of OTKA application (K 78 176) to Eötvös Loránd University’s Romanian Studies Department.
groups. The Hungarian Christian kings maintained this multi-ethnic tolerance, which persisted until the adoption of modern Western nationalism, linguistic nationalism, which divided the peoples of the Carpathian Basin, who had until then lived together free from ethnic rivalry, turning them against each other and leading to the dissolution of historical Hungary. According to Joó, the shared history of these peoples could have turned out differently if Hungarian nationalism had not diverged from its “hitherto unique course.” Hungarism, the elevated term for the Hungarus phenomenon, was an unfortunate invention, since the Hungarian Nazis adopted it as their own, while appropriating some of the greatest minds of Hungary’s reform age in the nineteenth century, and destroying and disgracing Hungary’s national existence with anti-Semitism, forming the fifth column of the Nazi Empire that turned Hungarians into a subsidiary nation of the superior race and dragging them into catastrophe.

In contrast to this policy, in 1940 Béla Pukánszky described relations between groups of German citizens and Hungary from the Age of Enlightenment until his own era. A fundamental characteristic of these relations was loyalty to the common homeland and to the Hungarians. He also revealed the individual and collective motivation behind the phenomenon that he referred to as the Hungarus idea: intellectuals and citizens had been living at peace, accepting the rights they enjoyed and understanding their own significance in the process of modernisation.

Hungary’s most influential national-political historian, Gyula Szekfű, who anticipated the Nazi menace in the mid-1930s, asserted programmatically in 1940, in opposition to racist-oriented speculations, that “cleansing our medieval ethnic concept, the spotless shield, is in our national interest, no matter how old-fashioned it may seem.” He cited King Saint Stephen’s Admonitions addressed to his son, a quotation that is part of the aforementioned shield: “A country using only one language and having only one custom is weak and frail.” In Szekfű’s view, it was undoubtedly anachronistic to use this as a guide and model, but the surrounding world was also outdated: democratic systems because they did not fulfil their obligations; while Nazism was atavism itself. According to Szekfű, the historical claim that King Stephen and his successors deliberately scattered national minorities within the country, with the goal of assimilation, gives “our history a German twist.” This is another memento of an era in which investigations of causes and effects were connected with

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2 T. Joó, Magyar nacionalizmus [Hungarian nationalism] (Budapest 1941), 193.
4 Gy. Szekfű, Nép, nemzet, állam [People, nation, state] (Budapest 2002), 467, 468.