

The history of interwar Hungary has all too often been written according to a particular ideology. After the Second World War, many accounts of the period painted an image of an antiquated, authoritarian, even fascist regime. Following the collapse of communism, the pendulum swung to the other side, and we witnessed conservative attempts to rehabilitate the era and its leaders, specifically the former regent of Hungary, Miklós Horthy. And only in the last couple of decades have more balanced accounts, as well as more nuanced analyses, been written. In this tradition, the monograph by Thomas Lorman on Minister President István Bethlen’s attempts to consolidate power between 1920 and 1925 and the translation of Mária Ormos’s summary of the entire interwar period in Hungary are welcome additions. These studies provide more balanced assessments and continue the work of others on the region and on the time period.

The history of Hungary between the two World Wars can be divided into different periods; and, as is often the case, the choice of starting and ending points is colored by methodology, ideology, and the material under study. To approach the era of 1918-1945 (or 1914-1945), one assumes that there is some coherence to the periodization, and too many historians have done this in order to describe the “counter-revolutionary” period of Hungarian history. Ormos’s choice of these dates, however, is more about her audience: the book was originally published in Hungarian as a handbook for university students.

Other chronological divisions are also possible. Hungary became a republic in November 1918, by attempting to break away from Habsburg control. The new democratic regime, however, never had time to take hold. Its successor, a Republic of Councils, only ruled for 133 days. By 1920 Hungary became a Kingdom without a King, when Miklós Horthy was selected as regent. Yet the Kingdom rejected its former King when he, twice in 1921, attempted to return to power in Hungary. These dramatic changes in the years after the Great War came to a halt by 1922 with the establishment of a form of political stability.

The Bethlen era (1921-1931) – the period when István Bethlen served as minister president – is a fairly obvious chronological delineation. During this time, politics were consolidated and the liberal-conservative practices of the pre-war era returned. Following this era, the 1930s saw a move to the right, as Hungarian politicians and the Hungarian public supported the authoritarian, racist ideologies that began to dominate in Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary became an ally of Nazi Germany and joined the Third Reich in the war against the Soviet Union and Bolshevism in 1941. Hungary was also a collaborator in Hitler’s war against the Jews. Horthy and others may have protected “Hungarian Jews” until 1944, while giving up non-Hungarian ones; but when the Germans occupied the country in March 1944, Hungarians were willing participants in the murder of Hungarian citizens.

Thomas Lorman breaks the mold with a fresh attempt at periodization. He tells the story of the political dealings between 1920 and 1925 that led to István Bethlen’s success in establishing a governmental party – a unity party – that dominated Hungary during most of the interwar period. Lorman’s account is a story of politics and political leaders; and, despite unpopularity
with some historians today toward such topics, it is a very important story that helps to explain Hungarian politics, society, economics, and life in general during the twentieth century.

Lorman is able to go beyond earlier studies of Bethlen and provide us with some clarity concerning the consolidation of the counter-revolution in Hungary. “This book…argues that the regime that took power in Hungary after the collapse of the Bolshevik dictatorship had no clearly thought out ideology and that no single ideological platform determined the policies by which the regime eventually consolidated its position. The regime itself was too heterogeneous, too divided between various competing factions, interests and individuals for any single ideology to emerge predominant.” Lorman contends that “Bethlen used policy formation as a political tactic to bolster the authority of his government, provide desperately needed political stability and consolidate the power of the counter-revolutionary regime.” (pp. xiii-xiv)

Between 1920 and 1925 Bethlen sought to reconstruct the old, pre-war governing party of István Tisza. To build the new party and to bolster political stability, Bethlen reached deals with other political parties and factions; and with these accommodations, Bethlen, by the spring of 1922, had created a broad-based conservative party, which during the course of 1922 won elections and established itself as the governing party. The party itself was almost above politics; it represented a wide range of conservative interests, “combined with an appeal to rural voters, and an emphasis on acting in the interests of the nation.” (p. 137) Most of its initial candidates came from the old Smallholder Party, the former Party of the Christian National Union, as well as dissident and independent groups.

Lorman demonstrates that the consolidation of the counter-revolution in Hungary was guided by the efforts of one man – István Bethlen. His policies between 1920 and 1925 were guided by a search for a way out of the chaos of the preceding years, “not the imposition of a clearly-thought out ideological platform.” (p. 224) By borrowing the old Tisza model, Bethlen restored political stability and consolidated the power of the counter-revolutionary regime. He worked to ensure that his party would serve as “a broad church of support for his premiership.” (p. 225) Lorman concludes that “Bethlen’s search for compromise solutions, the occupying of the middle ground, indeed the constant struggle to hold together a diverse collection of factions and interests within the confines of one governing party all combined to prevent him making the hard decisions necessary to modernize the country.” (p. 231) Bethlen left office in 1931, but some form of his party would continue to govern until Germany occupied Hungary in March 1944.

As already mentioned, Mária Ormos follows a more standard periodization (1914-1945). Hers is a history painted with a broad brush. It begins with a short discussion of Hungary in the Great War and then describes political developments from 1918 to the end of the Second World War in 1945: Hungary during the “stormy period.” “It [the book] explores the forces that propelled Hungarian history amidst hope and despair, independence and enfeeblement, democracy and dictatorship, relative development and decline. To what degree did the Hungarians determine their own destiny? How far was Hungary’s history decided by its geographical position and Great Power interests and policies in the region? How far did its defenselessness extend and where did it begin? Wherein lies the Hungarians’ responsibility for their own history?” (p. 2) The focus is on political history, most often international relations, since, as she argues, “There was hardly an event worth mentioning in domestic politics before 1930.” (p. 123) One could argue that it is too focused on political events and does not provide enough examples of social and economic aspects of interwar Hungary, but as an introductory text for Hungary between the world wars, it succeeds in providing the general framework that students need to understand.