

Hungarian History

Long form

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Heart of Europe: a brief history of Hungary

by Richard Berry

The **Carpathian Basin** has been home to many different peoples, among them Illyrians, Thracians, Scythians, Celts and Dacians. The Romans established the provinces of Pannonia and Dacia (corresponding roughly to Transdanubia and Transylvania), which became the demarcation line between Rome and the “barbarians”.

Hungarians

Linguistic evidence places the Hungarians in the Uralic language family (often still referred to as Finno-Ugric), the origins of which lie in the area around the Ural mountains some five or six thousand years ago. While their nearest linguistic kin, the Ostyaks and the Voguls, moved to the region of the River Ob in Siberia, the ancestors of the Hungarians began their journey westwards in the first centuries of our era. In **896**, under their military chieftain **Árpád**, the Hungarians flooded into the Carpathian Basin, defeating Bulgars, Franks and Bavarians.

The highly skilled Magyar horsemen and bowmen presented a challenge to European princes, hence the Swiss monks' prayer: “From the arrows of the Magyars, Lord, deliver us.” Magyar incursions into Italy, France and Germany and even Spain terrified Europe. However in **955** they were defeated at Augsburg by Otto I, founder of the Holy Roman Empire.

The reign of Stephen and the Árpád dynasty

Under **István (Stephen)**, later St Stephen), the first King of Hungary (crowned **AD 1000**), Hungary became a Christian country, adopting the Latin rite of the Western Church. Stephen's ruthless campaigns against the remnants of paganism resulted in the pope granting him the title of "apostolic king" and the right to use the apostolic double cross. Stephen unified the country and increased royal power. He encouraged a tolerant attitude to non-Hungarian settlers and is credited with the statement: "A nation of one race is feeble." By the time of his death in **1038**, decrees issued during his reign regulated every aspect of public administration, revenues and the defence of the realm, as well as property and inheritance rights. This period witnessed the minting of the earliest Hungarian coins, the silver *denarii*.

Stephen's heir Prince Imre predeceased his father and the country fell into a period of civil strife after 1038. There were also frequent wars with Byzantium. Thus when **László I** (1077-95) ascended the throne, the country was in a poor state. Canonized a century later, he fended off repeated incursions by the Cumanans from the east, joined the crowns of Croatia and Slavonia to that of Hungary and founded the Bishopric of Zagreb in **1094**. He became known as László the Legislator after developing a new codex of laws.

Under **Kálmán** (1095-1116), Hungarian power extended to the Adriatic. **Béla III** (1172-96) thoroughly reorganized the country's government in line with Byzantine administrative practice. This was a period of considerable prosperity: a substantial proportion of the gold, silver and copper mined in Europe throughout most of the Middle Ages came from Hungary.

The most significant development in the reign of **András II** (1205-35) was the promulgation of the Golden Bull – often mentioned as Hungary's Magna Carta – in **1222**.

The **Mongol invasion** in **1241-2** laid waste to the country, leaving **Béla IV** (1235-70) to rebuild towns, villages and fortresses, including the new town of Buda. His reign was also notable for the rise of baronial power, and for conflict with his son **István V** (1270-2). By the time the last member of the Árpád dynasty, **András III** (1290-1301), came to the throne, the country had been carved up by the nobility. However this had been an era of constitutional reform, including the establishment of a **Diet** (parliament). This joint meeting of bishops, barons and elected representatives of the counties was first referred to as the *Parlamentum Publicum* in **1289**.

The later Middle Ages

On the extinction of the Árpád dynasty, the Anjou **Charles I** (Charles-Robert, **1301-42**) became king. His reign was marked by the restoration of royal authority and the overhaul of State finances to the benefit of the crown. At this point the population reached three million. There were 49 free royal towns as well as 638 market towns, and the peasantry were largely free. On the international stage, Charles-Robert built up Hungarian military might and even mediated between Poland and Bohemia over Silesia. His son, **Lajos I** (Louis the Great, **1342-82**), who conducted an aggressive foreign policy, extending Hungarian power to the Adriatic, reinforced this external might. At this time trade thrived, and the cities prospered. The kingdom was badly hit by the **Black Death** of **1346-53**, which claimed perhaps as much as 20-30 per cent of the population and had an impact on trade and commerce across Europe. In **1370** he inherited the Polish crown from his father-in-law, making Hungary the dominant power in Central Europe.

The reign of **Zsigmond (Sigismund, 1387-1437)** saw a series of military and administrative reforms. This age produced one of the great heroes of Hungarian history, **János Hunyadi**. Despite initial successes against the Turks, including the

relief of Belgrade (**1456**), his defeat at Kosovo in **1448** served notice of the might of the Ottoman Empire. Hunyadi's son **Mátyás (Matthias Corvinus, 1458-90)** became one of Hungary's most famous kings. He bequeathed to the country a just and effective administration, a strong standing army and a well-maintained line of fortifications in the south. He maintained a splendid Renaissance court, swarming with artists and scholars, and a famous library – the Bibliotheca Corviniana – at Buda, consisting of 1500 manuscript books. Abroad he defeated the Polish and imperial armies of Frederick at Breslau (Wrocław). Hungarian power was confirmed by the **Treaty of Olomouc (1479)**.

Social discontent resulted in the **peasants' revolt** of **1514**, led by György Dózsa. This uprising was ruthlessly crushed. The result was “the second serfdom”, as the crown, Church and nobility codified their control over the peasantry. Further disaster followed on **29 August 1526**, when the army of Suleiman I, the Magnificent, inflicted a catastrophic defeat at **Mohács** in southern Hungary.

The Reformation and the coming of the Habsburgs

The Reformation swept through Hungary. In the eastern part of the kingdom the town of Debrecen became known as the “Calvinist Rome”. Transylvania flourished under Princes **István Bocskai (1605-6)** and **Gábor Bethlen (1614-29)**. This period also witnessed the first complete translation of the Bible. The impact of the Reformation and Erasmus’s Humanism was evident in the work of Balassi and Zrínyi. The **Counter-Reformation**, dominated by the Hungarian primate Pázmány, saw the emergence of Baroque art and architecture, promoted by aristocrats such as the Eszterházy family. However, under **Leopold I (1657-1705)**, who attempted to govern Hungary directly from Vienna, the Counter-Reformation became oppressive.

Transylvania was constituted as a hereditary Habsburg duchy, and was not, despite demands, reunited with the rest of the country. After 150 years of Turkish rule the Ottoman Empire faced increasing challenges, notably from the Habsburgs. Buda was retaken in **September 1686**. Habsburg power was not entirely welcome, and there was a series of anti-Habsburg uprisings, most notably the **Kuruc movement** under **Imre Thököly (1657-1705)**. This campaign was continued by **Ferenc II Rákóczi**, Prince of Transylvania, who conducted, **from 1703 to 1711**, a campaign of liberation that ended in defeat.

The reign of **Maria Theresa (1740-80)** offered some hope. Her enlightened absolutism gave rise to important cultural and educational reforms. The country was torn in its attitude towards her son **Joseph II (1780-90)**, who aimed to impose enlightened government from above. Eminent Hungarians of the period – such as **Count Ferenc Széchenyi**, who founded the National Library, and **Ferenc Kazinczy**, the organiser and largely benign dictator of Hungarian literary life – supported many of his reforms, notably in education. However, he alienated much of the population by

refusing to convoke national parliaments and to be crowned with the crown of Hungary, and by promoting German as the official language.

Under the impact of the French Revolution and, in particular, the Paris Terror, Vienna introduced strict policing and censorship. This did not clash with the priorities of the nobility, who feared the outbreak of revolution in Hungary. In the **1790s**, the very ideas that frightened the Habsburg court inspired a considerable number of Hungarian intellectuals – writers, poets, lawyers, even clergymen, most of them freemasons, who formed a Jacobin Circle and circulated liberal tracts that provoked another period of **Habsburg repression**.

In 1804 **Francis I (1792-1835)** renamed the lands of the Habsburg crown “**The Austrian Empire**”, claiming rule by divine right. Despite catastrophic defeats by Napoleon, after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 Austria emerged as one of the victorious powers. Postwar reaction under Chancellor Metternich ensured that there would be no room for compromise with Hungarian demands. However, the ideals of the French Revolution were not so easily swept aside: the way was open for a clash between nationalism/liberalism and autocracy.

In **1848** the monarchies of Europe were shaken by violent revolution. In Hungary a revolutionary grouping led by **Lajos Kossuth** proclaimed the twelve points of the **March Programme**, which included freedom of the press, the abolition of censorship, the creation of a national assembly and the withdrawal of foreign forces (i.e. Austrian imperial forces). Aided by the radicals led by the poet **Sándor Petőfi**, a national government under **Count Lajos Batthyányi** was formed. However, there was considerable debate amongst the revolutionaries over what was referred to as the “**national question**”: the rights of Croats, Slovenes and the other peoples of the empire, who feared that Hungarian rule might be no better than that of Austria.

Following defeat near Vienna, the revolutionaries headed eastwards, only to be defeated by a combined Austro-Russian army in **August 1849**.

From revolution to compromise: the Austro-Hungarian Empire

The bloody repression that followed turned Hungary into a police state, and re-established Austrian absolutism. In **1859** the defeat of Austrian forces by the French, and moves towards national unification in Europe, particularly by Garibaldi in Italy, aroused Hungarian hopes. The establishment of an Imperial Council did little to assuage their anger, but in **1866** the defeat of Austrian forces by the Prussians prompted a search for a settlement to keep the multinational empire intact. The result was the **1867 *Ausgleich* (Compromise)**, which led to the establishment of the **Austro-Hungarian Empire**. On 8 June 1867 **Franz Joseph**, Emperor of Austria, was proclaimed **King of Hungary**. Kossuth, the great hero of 1848 (now in exile), denounced the Compromise. Hungarian politics was dominated by the struggle between the pro-independence and pro-Compromise parties until 1914. The Kingdom of Hungary encompassed many nationalities and this caused serious problems – only 54 per cent of the population of 18.3 million (excluding Croatia) were ethnically Hungarian.

In the imperial period industrialization continued apace: in **1873** the ancient towns of Óbuda, Buda and Pest joined together to create a single city administration as **Budapest**. In 1867 there had been 170 joint stock companies employing 100,000 workers; by 1914, 5,500 plants were employing 600,000 workers. Foreign investment flowed in and the development of the railways linked the farthest reaches of the kingdom. But these developments engendered a discontented working class. In addition, the peasantry failed in its efforts to promote and reform, which continued to

have little chance of success as long as governments were dominated by the aristocracy.

The years **1867 to 1914** also witnessed a flowering of Hungarian education and culture. Composers such as **Liszt** brought Hungarian music to the world stage, while the new generation of poets and writers, including **János Arany**, **Endre Ady**, and later **Attila József** and **Dezső Kosztolányi** flourished. The country produced an abundance of physicians, scientists and engineers. At the same time, increasing numbers of Hungarians emigrated to the United States. Hungary was a land dominated by the aristocracy and an increasingly confident bourgeoisie – this is illustrated by the achievements of the industrial age and the flowering of a literary and café society to rival that of any city in Europe. Yet the old discontents would not vanish: the rural/urban divide was still pronounced, and the workers remained unsatisfied with their lot. Moreover, by tying itself to Austria, Hungary also tied itself to imperial foreign policy, which led it into the disastrous abyss of the **First World War**.

From 1914 to 1945

The defeat of the central powers in the **First World War** finally brought about a collapse of the empires and the emergence of newly independent states of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Austria and Hungary. The **Treaty of Trianon**, signed on **4 July 1920**, was a devastating blow to the new Hungarian state, reducing it to one-third of its former size. Transylvania was transferred to Romania and northern territories were given to the new Czechoslovakia, while many southern territories were transferred to Yugoslavia. Thus some 3.4 million Hungarian-speakers became citizens of new, often hostile states. Moreover, the loss of territory meant the loss of markets and raw materials: Hungary was deprived of 80 per cent of its forests and iron ore. This

punitive treaty was to contribute greatly to the instability of the inter-war period and drive Hungary into the arms of a resurgent Germany.

Defeat brought about revolution as the **communists** under **Béla Kun** established a short-lived **People's Republic** in the spring of **1919**. In November, Romanian forces occupied Budapest. This was followed by a Hungarian counter-revolutionary campaign under **Admiral Horthy**. For the remainder of the inter-war period there existed a dictatorship that allowed a controlled parliament to function. In essence the aristocracy, the Church and the military, with the support of many state-subsidized industrialists, dominated the government, while the peasantry and the working class fared badly. Their fate was compounded by the impact of the Great Depression of 1929, which led to impoverishment and unemployment. The **1930s** saw a rise in extremist politics, in which anti-Semitism played a powerful role.

In **August 1940**, with German help, northern Transylvania returned to Hungary, and in **November 1940** Hungary joined the Axis powers. Hungarian armies took part in the invasion of the Soviet Union in **June 1941** and suffered a disastrous defeat. Attempts to negotiate peace failed when the Hungarian fascists – the **Arrow Cross** – seized power in **March 1944**, with the support of the German army. This led to the **deportation of Jews and the Romany population**, resulting in over 450,000 murders. The **siege of Budapest** by the Soviets brought about the destruction of the city and industry, leaving the population starving.

From 1945 to the present

With the onset of the **Cold War** Hungary was absorbed into the Soviet bloc. The gradual communization of the country gave way to bloody **Stalinist repression**, with the State taking control of social as well as economic life. Under the communist dictator **Mátyás Rákosi** a regime of terror reigned. The death of Stalin in **March 1953** led to

power struggles that paralysed the country, and in **1956** a revolution to overthrow communist rule was bloodily suppressed, leaving over 2,000 dead and 200,000 in exile. The revolutionary leader **Imre Nagy** was executed. The establishment of the **Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party** under **János Kádár** maintained communist rule.

The Kádár era (**1956-88**) saw many changes: in the first instance the new regime engaged in retribution against those who had taken part in the 1956 revolution, and then gradually the regime relaxed many of the more oppressive forms of control. While neighbouring states succumbed to neo-Stalinism (Romania), others descended into chaos (Poland) and yet others suffered invasion (Czechoslovakia), Kádár sought to maintain a more liberal and balanced approach. Economic reforms were introduced in **1968**, but this could not disguise the illegitimate nature of the regime, or the fact that the economy was weak and the government was resorting to considerable foreign borrowing to sustain itself.

The **collapse of communism in 1989**, in which Hungary played a major role by opening its borders, led to the establishment of a parliamentary democracy in which the rule of law and an independent judiciary and free elections are the key features. Despite the difficulties of a painful economic transition from an economy controlled by the state to a market economy, Hungary is modernizing its economic mechanisms at a rapid rate. The reorientation in external relations is illustrated by the fact that in **May 2004** Hungary joined the **European Union**.

Postscript

Despite the terrible twentieth century of wars and revolution, Hungarians continued to make their mark in science, cinema and literature. This is evident not only when we look at Hungary itself, but when we examine the enormous contribution Hungarians

have made on the world stage, most notably in the United States. **Béla Bartók** and **Zoltán Kodály**, and more recently **György Ligeti** and **György Kurtág**, have made enormous contributions to Hungarian and indeed world music; the **Korda brothers** helped to create the British film industry, while the role of Hungarians in establishing Hollywood is legendary. Hungary's strength in cinema can also be seen in the work of **István Szabó**. **Edward Teller** and his compatriots advanced the frontiers of American and world science, while the work of the writer **Imre Kertész** was recognized by the Nobel prize for literature in 2002. This small selection from a vast list gives an indication of the impact Hungarians have had on the world.

Hungary has played a major part in European and world history: from settlement to renaissance, through revolution and industrialization, world war and communism, it has been at the heart of Europe.

Note: As it is difficult to do justice to the long history of Hungary in a short article, I recommend reading Paul Lendvai, *The Hungarians: 1,000 Years of Victory in Defeat* (Hurst, London 2003) and Miklós Molnár, *A Concise History of Hungary* (Cambridge University Press 2001).