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Go East!: A History of Hungarian Turanism

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The scholarly origins of ethno-linguistics is always a fascinating framework of inquiry. The rapidity of any findings in this field though, being appropriated into far right nationalism devoid of scholarship and formed on superficial bullying politics of power is consistently disturbing. Balázs Ablonczy's scholarship shines through in this history of people shaping an interesting and refined idea. Ablonczy's is an excellent history, far deeper and broader than the contemporary Hungarian political narrative which has been captured from the same sources that it is constructed from. Turanianism in this Hungarian form was less about linguistic and geographic ethnology and more about finding a polity-defining theory to base a political push into the future on. In that sense, its appropriation by Viktor Orbán and Fidesz in the age of the European Union is more understandable as an interrelationship between the right element in the Hungarian polity seeking not a return to Turanian origins, but a return to the legitimacy of Turanism as political thought through the 20th century. This is the dangerous element of revising this already revisionist history for a modern populist movement.

Ablonczy here though offers an impartial, apolitical and genuinely authoritative history of a political thought through a mosaic of smaller people, actions and institutions within the historical record. Ablonczy details the loose collection of personalities and the formal institutions which formed the foundation of the Hungarian Turanist movement. Natural for the time, most institutions took

the form of business and social groups such as the freemasons, the Hungarian Eastern Economic Center, the Turanian Society (later the Hungarian Eastern Cultural Center); or the formal scientific and philanthropic societies such as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Orientalist Institute, though these were more often formal academic manifestations of the lobbying power of the members of the stronger Hungarian Eastern Economic Center. The grand mosaic of Ablonczy's history is mostly tiled from the falling institutional debris of the collapse and dissolution of the Dual Monarchy. Hungarian elites watched the development of European nationhood in modern Turkey while still cultivating connections with Balkan and Ottoman groups based on the shared institutional confusion of Hungarian Easternism. Against the reality of institutional decay, the need for a replacement Central European political ideology conflicted with contemporary ideas of statism.

'The East' of the Hungarian Turanists shares much with the émigré White Russians of Eurasianism in the 1920s, struggling with the problems of geographic determinism, linguistics and ethnography. The Russian Eurasianist émigrés were working in Central and Eastern Europe at the same time period as the development of Hungarian Turanism, exploring the same call to nature and geographic determinism which was later built out into an ethnic minority ideology in the Soviet Union through a combination of cooptation and genuine interpretation of Gumilev's work. Both Eurasian and Turanism though veer dangerously into the ethno-identitarianism that destroyed 20th century Europe, and of which the 21st century politics are still rightly wary. For Hungarian Turanism though, the core impetus for a sustained attempt at ideology formation throughout the long 20th century was the concept of Turanic peoples as an identity in opposition to other European identities, and an identity also at odds with either the small industrial nationalism emerging in Western Europe or the large decaying multi-ethnic Empires of the Dual Monarchy and the Ottoman.

The history as a whole though is a smooth narrative. Perhaps Ablonczy could have connected the reader more clearly with the changing tapestry of Europe at the time, we often feel fully buried in domestic Hungarian people and institutions and then force ourselves to remember what else was happening in Europe at the time. Throughout, the ideas of Turanism as they developed also always seem sequestered within a sand box. The exploration of Eastern historiographic, ethnographic, anthropological and linguistic origins was developed by a society which was overwhelmingly European, an Austro-Hungarian society of periodicals, artistic and scientific societies, Hungarian Turanism was developed by the elites and the inheritors of an advanced European empire. Perhaps here is the book's key fault, largely ignoring the Turanist movement's impact on any of the early 20th century wars which shaped the internal form of the Hungarian state

and society. Concepts of ethnonationalism and economic nationalism were intertwined in the 20th century, resulting in devastating industrial nationalist wars. Hungary's internal political frictions developed alongside the ethnographic tradition of Turanism, and the interplay between conflicting national identities must have been formative through the First and Second World War periods. Instead, we skate over both wars, as if they were merely 19th century imperial border skirmishes, not bothering the coffee house Turan elites in Buda.

This is a thoroughly good history though, it is not sensationalist, not rushed and not politicised in its findings or arguments. It is a calm, reasoned, well thought through and cogent narrative based on each part being in good enough form to allow each moving part to be disassembled and reassembled to examine for functionality. Ablonczy has constructed a miniaturised version of history here, populated with a cast of hundreds of characters, each built up competently from source work. This is the type of sweeping history which accurately delivers the macroscope of grand historical narrative simply by animating all the small human personalities who actually created their history. In terms of publication standards, Indiana University Press here is outdoing some of the larger imprints in quality, and a well-priced paperback version is most welcome. The endnotes are in good order, neither excessive nor unnecessarily clipped. Early and mid-career scholars should take note that university imprints like this do such a good job that there is no need to use the lower-tier Routledge or IB Tauris publishers when such great university presses are still doing real work.

Ablonczy's history is like a cathedral in Mittel Europa, the architectural façades full of detail which adds to the overall beauty, the structure itself solidly planned out. This book is well founded and structured, each piece whether ornamental or functional can be disassembled, examined and appreciated on its own, and the functional usefulness of describing the political motivations, structures and future signposts of a theory of pan-ethnonationalism which cuts to the heart of the European political identity in the 21st century is monumentally useful.