

Epstein, Irene R.

Gyula Szekfű: A Study in the Political Basis of Hungarian Historiography

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According to Irene R. Epstein's book, *Gyula Szekfű: A Study in the Political Basis of Hungarian Historiography*, no historian has had a greater impact on Hungarian historiography in the twentieth century than Gyula Szekfű. During his fifty-one year career Szekfű experienced the most traumatic and turbulent years in Hungarian history. His career began as a pro-Habsburg Dualist from 1904 until the end of the First World War. Later, he went through an anti-liberal and nationalistic phase until the 1930's, when he recognized the threat of Hungary's pro-German policy. Fearing the rise of fascism and the "domestic degradation of the Hungarian state", Szekfű became involved in the anti-German resistance movement during the Second World War and supported and justified the Communist regime that followed Hungary's liberation. It is during these chaotic times that Szekfű "traveled from the far right to the far left of the political spectrum, appearing sincere at every stage of his life".

Epstein writes that the theme of her book is to "explore the connection between politics and historical scholarship in the case of Szekfű". In this regard she has shown that Szekfű's historiography was conditioned by the changing Hungarian political realities of the twentieth century. In the early years Szekfű was a pioneer of the new historic spirit championed by the Germans Ranke, Meinecke, and Naumann. Szekfű thought that the writing of history "rested on the twin pillars of politics and psychology". His *Der Staat Ungarn*, "intended to treat the history of Hungary as an organic process that emphasized those factors which influenced its political and cultural development". According to Szekfű, it was modeled on Meinecke's *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat*.

Szekfű's second book, *A száműzött Rákóczi* (The Exiled Rákóczi), "constituted [an] important landmark in Hungarian historiography and in the development of [his] career". This book is significant for a variety of reasons. First, it challenged the present school of historical scholarship of Kálmán Thaly; second, its theme supported the *Labanc*, or pro-Habsburg approach to Hungarian history over the more popular *Kuruc*, or pro-Hungarian independence approach. Szekfű, a deeply religious individual, saw the "great-Magyars" as those "who remained and undertook the difficult work of the 'double task': to retain domestic independence while being part of German politics and German culture". Hungary's future was tied to a *Mitteuropa* under German hegemony. For Szekfű, history showed that disaster came to Hungary whenever it was connected with the East, and prosperity whenever Hungary was associated with the German West. Naturally, the "great" Hungarians included Széchenyi and Deák, who worked towards compromising with the King while attempting to achieve a greater degree of domestic independence for their nation. Kossuth and Rákóczi, heroes of the *Kuruc* school, undermined Hungary's development by ignoring the political and geographical reality by fighting to achieve Hungary's independence.

This study is organized into three sections: early pro-Habsburg, the inter-war period, and Szekfű's post-war change to socialism. As Epstein points out, Szekfű needed "to adjust to new political circumstances rather than cling to old principles". She uses Szekfű's early works as an excellent spring board into the most important and influential phase of his life: the inter-war years. During this period Szekfű's writings, specifically his book *Három Nemzedék* (Three Generations), a book that explains Hungarian history over the course of three generations, describes the reasons for Hungary's recent debacle. Széchenyi was Szekfű's model for Hungarians to emulate: the *Labanc* school that supported constitutional change within the monarchy while maintaining a *Kaisertreu* approach to Austria. But as Epstein points out, "*Három nemzedék* reveals more about Szekfű in the 1920's than about Széchenyi in the 1830's".

Három Nemzedék was an attack on the sins of liberalism, and the role of the Jews in Hungarian history. Szekfű believed the establishment of a "Christian national estate state" was to be the basis of Hungary's future. Political liberalism in cultural and economic affairs was disastrous for Hungary, especially for the lesser nobles. It was the foremost cause of disorder and moral decline in society. The liberal policies of Kálmán Tisza represented the threat of liberalism. Liberalism exacerbated the nationality conflict with the rise of integral na-

tionalism. Liberal governments allowed the spread of socialist ideas. It was an anti-Christian, un-Hungarian system of ideas "whose basic principles were the apotheosis of human selfishness". The greatest crime of liberalism was its attack on the Church. For the Christian Szekff, the church was the fundamental basis of society. "Doctrinaire liberalism" eventually led to radicalism and revolution.

The immigration and assimilation of the Jews was equally as destructive as liberalism. Epstein does an admirable job in explaining the importance of Szekff's prejudices towards the Jews. Jews were predominant in the intellectual fields, and were able to prosper with the economic freedom they enjoyed. Szekff wanted to reduce the economic and intellectual importance of the Jews in Hungarian society. This was one of the ways of establishing the basis of this Christian national program. But anti-Semitism became part of Szekff's ideas because Jews were associated with liberalism and the failed revolutions, Károlyi and Kun, that had just recently taken place in 1919. Szekff is especially critical of Oszkár Jászi, because of his demagogic practice amongst the Bourgeois Radicals. Szekff used the inter-war practice of putting the original family name in parenthesis when writing about Jászi, so he wrote Jászi's name as "Oszkár Jászi (Jakubovics)". Epstein exposes Szekff's rationalization for limiting the rights of Jews in Hungarian society. Also, the reader can see the importance of Szekff's writings on the historiography of the inter-war period and, more important, on the establishment of the Horthy regime. As pointed out by László Bóka, Szekff's *Három Nemzedék* made it possible for many in intellectual to find their way to Horthy.

The major accomplishment of this book is Hungarian historiography is made understandable for non-Hungarian readers. The lack of work in English on Hungarian historiography makes this work essential for students of East European history. Also, since the vast majority of Szekff's works are not translated into English, Epstein's work is indispensable to the reader who wants to comprehend the merits of Szekff's scholarship in the context of Hungarian History. Naturally, Epstein's book has much to offer to Hungarian readers as well. It is one of the first such books on Szekff to appear in print, however, why was there a delay of thirteen years to reach publication? The source material is well established and organized. Epstein has left no stone unturned in this study. She has shown Szekff to be sincere in each stage of his life. Szekff's writings do show that he fears the rise of fascism in Europe. His deep religious feelings made him fear what will become of Hungary in a world dominated by Nazi Germany. Nazism was an evil he could not deal with because it meant the destruction of the moral order he saw necessary for Hungary's future. Also, Szekff's disenchantment with Horthy's policy towards agrarian reform becomes apparent. He viewed Horthy's government as a house of cards that was morally corrupt. Szekff's movement towards resistance illustrates the sincerity of his motives.

Szekff's move towards supporting the communist government is fascinating. He saw in the socialist system the order that was necessary for his Hungary to function and survive. Although he may have compromised himself and not seen the reality of what was happening around him, this was also the case during the early inter-war years. This book could have used more historical development on this period, but this is only necessary to clarify the events that are taking place. As ambassador to the Soviet Union, Szekff's life in Moscow deserves to be the subject of a separate work. Coming out of the destruction of the two world wars Szekff saw only those things that needed to be seen. Hungary needed to be associated with a larger power, and Soviet Russia seemed to be a state that exhibited a more humanistic approach towards its citizens than the liberal West or Nazi Germany. After the failures of the latter systems to solve Hungary's domestic problems, Szekff, who "emphasized the primacy of external factors: the deciding influence of foreign policy, and the overriding interest of the state within the domestic realm", moved to the East and left. Also, age was an additional factor that had to be considered in his choice. But the swift manner in which the new regime solved the agrarian problem by the distribution of land to the peasants showed the intent of the new government to rescue Hungary from her past.

In conclusion, Epstein has written a book that not only illustrates excellent scholarship, but also a well-developed analysis of her subject. To fully understand Hungarian history during this period it is necessary to know the works of Szekff and the effect he had on the development of historiography in Hungary. Epstein has made this possible for both those who are familiar and unfamiliar with Szekff and Hungary.