

Ablonczy, Balázs. 2022. Go East! A History of Hungarian Turanism. Translated by Sean Lambert. Studies in Hungarian History. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. 278 pp. Illus.

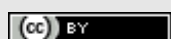
Reviewed by Zsuzsanna Varga¹, University of Glasgow

Balázs Ablonczy's book *Go East!* focuses on the largely unwritten story of Hungarian "Turanism," offering a comprehensive history of Hungarians' thinking about their ethnic and linguistic origins and kinship from their eighteenth-century beginnings to the present day. The volume first appeared in Hungarian in 2016 under the title *Keletre, magyar! A magyar turanizmus története* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2016), deliberately rhyming with "Tengerre, magyar!," Lajos Kossuth's 1846 call for constructing a railway line between the only Hungarian seaport, Fiume (today: Rijeka, Croatia), and Pest-Buda.² Though devoid of its original associations, the call is still recognizable to Hungarians, triggering connotations of travel, voyage, and adventure. The international reader has no recourse to such associations, but the call's very essence—movement—is nicely captured in the translated title. "Movement" is a key element here: Hungarian travelers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries physically traveled eastward in search of linguistic and ethnic fraternities while their stay-at-home successors made mental moves to incorporate such thinking into their cultural and political agendas. Tracing the shift of ideas from pure scholarly musings to explicit political agendas is indeed one of the book's aims. The longevity of Turanist thought is not to be ignored: indeed, as Ablonczy points out, "the Eastern idea had engaged a significant segment of Hungarian intellectual public life with ever-renewing force from the beginning of Hungarian political modernity until the present day" (p. 5).

Ablonczy, professor of twentieth-century history at Eötvös Loránd University, in Budapest, earlier established his reputation as a historian through several books in which he scrutinised the presence of post-World War I territorial losses in Hungarian collective memory (*Ismeretlen Trianon*, 2020) and the career of the interwar Hungarian prime minister Pál Teleki (2005). With *Go East!*, he has turned to a more overarching type of intellectual history. In it he traces one tradition of Hungarian collective thinking through its manifestations in major scholarly and other organizations, as well as educational institutions, while also producing lively vignettes of leading personalities such as the boring yet effective bureaucrat Aladár Paikert, or the much more socially privileged yet equally difficult Count Jenő Zichy. These personalities had a shaping force on this very broadly understood movement, which, as Ablonczy points out, stems from a—real or imaginary—tension between Hungarians' Eastern origins and the

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² Tengerhez magyar! el a tengerhez!* | KOSSUTH LAJOS ÖSSZES MUNKÁI | Kézikönyvtár (arcanum.com)



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inclination of many Hungarians to follow Western social, political, and institutional models. The book's leading themes include the different understandings of how linguistic and ethnic collectivity were successively and frequently conflated or separated, as well as the unexplored dimensions of the historical shift toward an (ethno)-linguistic understanding of national identity, which culminated in the Ugric-Turkic war (of linguists) in the nineteenth century. This war was won by the Finno-Ugric team, but the dilemma's longevity is shown by its revival in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. An equally strong undercurrent is the use of Turanist thinking for foreign policy directions, and the book carefully documents the place of Turanism across the social fields.

True to a historian, the author lays out the material in chronological chapters. Chapter 1 sets the scene by emphasizing the significance of Turanian thinking in Hungarian intellectual life, pointing to the intensification of the conflict between Eastern origins and Western aspirations during the institutionalization of the modern Hungarian nation; that is, when such institutions as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the National Theatre, and the National Museum emerged. Chapter 2 focuses on the pre-1900 Hungarian interest in the East (as a source of collective identity) as an inspiration for undertaking travels in that direction—Sándor Kőrösi Csoma being the foremost example—and discussing the Ugric-Turkic linguistic war, fought by prominent linguists in a bid to settle the kinship terms of the language. Ablonczy here carefully emphasizes that his work needs to be differentiated from the dominant mode of twenty-first century discussions of the Orient: rather than tracing and unmasking political colonization or the "othering" of Oriental people, the Hungarian Eastern outlook was "to weave a new network of political, economic, and cultural connections based on ethnic kinship and mutual benefit." (p. 35)

Chapter 3 covers the "Golden Age" of Hungarian Turanism, whose early institutionalization through the establishment of the Turanian Society (1910) led to the very distinct Turkophilia during the years of World War I, giving inspiration for plans for a mosque in Budapest and for the temporary renaming of Múzeum Boulevard as Sultan Mehmet Street. The fundamental attitude of the Hungarian government—that Hungarians should exercise a civilizing influence on less developed nations—is manifest in the launch of education program for "Turanian youth" in 1916–17. By 1916–18, the Turanian movement had grown into a comprehensive one. This expansion is the focus of Chapter 4 ("Silver Age") as it traces the proliferation of various organizations in the interwar period, ranging from the radical Turanian Alliance to the scholarly Kőrösi Csoma Society. Language courses and study trips stood in focus, and they were also behind the sending of engineers to Turkey in the 1920s as part of Turkey's post-Ottoman modernization. Yet these activities always remained in the sphere of culture for, as Ablonczy is keen to point out, interwar foreign policy always adhered to a Western orientation even after the disappointment and bitterness stemming from the Treaty of Trianon. (p. 104) The targeting of an independent Finland and Estonia for a closer alliance indicates a sort of "marriage" between Turanism and Finno-Ugric until 1945.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer a genuine cultural history of Turanian manifestations in the everyday life of the interwar period. Although the plan for a Turanian school curriculum was abandoned, the residual effect of Turanism "might be felt the most acutely in the domain of

culture, particularly in the arts." (p. 176) The detailed examination of the work of architects István Medgyaszay, Ede Toroczkai Wigand, and Jenő Lechner, whose Turanian-inspired, rich contributions to the 1930s cityscape of Budapest "reformulated the Asian aspects of what they considered to be the soul of the Hungarian people." (p.185)

Chapter 7 accounts for the position of the other "Turanian" countries vis-à-vis the movement. The supposedly cohesive group was, in fact, rather diverse: Estonians vouched for a Uralic communality with the exclusion of Central Asians while Turkish Turanists were interested in communality with other Turkic peoples. These selective affinities were often shaded by political affinities resulting from the shared experience of recent territorial losses, yet nowhere did they change the Western orientation of foreign policy.

Chapter 8 recounts the life of Hungary's Turanist community after World War II: those who remained in Hungary were either marginalized or forced underground due to the communist regime's commitment to considering Finno-Ugric kinship the central educational tenet. Hence it was left to émigré circles to publicly voice alternative visions of Oriental kinship. Occasionally, their radicalism bordered on the extreme, some championing Hungarian-Sumerian connection or convinced that the nineteenth-century proponents of the Finno-Ugric school were Habsburg agents in disguise.

The book's short portrayals of domestic and émigré Turanists not only serve as an introduction to the most active such persons but also illustrate the fortunes of many Hungarian intellectuals more generally: "the thinking of those who dealt with the issues of Hungarian ancient history and kinship in Hungary during the communist era reveals that the distortions of dictatorship affect the reasoning of even those who strive to retain their intellectual independence." (p. 229)

Chapter 9 relates the post-Cold War fortunes of the Hungarian Turanist movement. The revival of the supposedly ancient Hungarian Runic script and the publication of books and periodicals written by émigrés gave the movement a new lease on life. Its revival in post-1990 Hungary is due, Ablonczy suggests, to a "dissatisfaction with promises of prosperity" and enduring political crisis. More importantly, and for the first time, Hungarian thinking about the collective self in the context of Oriental affinities has taken on a political dimension, he argues, as it has articulated a political strategy of finding an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic orientation. It is for this reason that 2022 was an opportune moment for this book to appear in English translation: *Go East!* offers and vital inroad into tracing a possible history of such thinking.

One last word—about the work's translation. Sean Lambert has established himself as a translator of contemporary Hungarian historical works into English, and his rendition of Ablonczy's lively account does justice to the original text. Nevertheless, some culture-specific references should have been treated with much more attention. These include "egyetemi magántan"—rendered as "private lecturer" on more than one occasion (though "part-time professor" would better capture the original)—and while the translator's leaning toward domestication and a principled avoidance of footnotes is understandable, the lack of in-text explicatory notes leaves certain terms cryptic or hard to understand. Casual mistranslations such as calling Thököly Rákóczi's stepfather "foster father" (p. 21) should have been avoided, and the

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reader would hope that these slight misunderstandings would be revised for a well-deserved second edition.

Go East! represents a highly commendable form of scholarship—namely, one that strikes this reader as uncommon in Hungary and is rarely found among English-language works of Hungarian historiography. Its impressive archival research and its consultation of obscure periodicals are duly matched with a deeply engaging and entertaining discussion, bringing to life some eccentric characters, and adding an important dimension to the architectural history of interwar Budapest. Moreover, locating current political developments in their historicity offers an immensely important context for political scientists, and the depth of research and the highly enjoyable storytelling offers an example for historians to emulate.