

**Pálffy, Géza. 2021. *Hungary Between Two Empires, 1526-1711*.
Trans. David Robert Evans. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP. 284
pp.**

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As George Orwell famously wrote, “who controls the past, controls the future [and] who controls the present controls the past” – a message with increased resonance in the dizzying political climate we find ourselves in today (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 1949: 44). These words are particularly salient in present-day Hungary and Europe more generally, wherever history is routinely distorted and decontextualized to suit the political whims of the moment. In *Hungary Between Two Empires, 1526-1711*, Hungarian historian Géza Pálffy set out to correct the record in his own field of study, using new research findings on early modern Hungary to uproot and supplant historiographical orthodoxy from the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. The book is encyclopedic and comprehensive in its scope, probing the socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics at play in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hungary. Pálffy is eager to undercut overly romantic, popular visions of historical Hungary, using his analysis to underscore the lack of political and economic maneuverability of a territory sandwiched between two ascendent empires. Transylvania, in particular, captures center stage in Pálffy’s analysis. Probing Transylvania’s political and economic position in a trisected Hungary, Pálffy urged readers to “... dispose with the interpretation that has achieved mythical status in Hungary, according to which the seventeenth-century brought a series of Hungarian national independence or national unity movements” that were instigated from the region (2). *Hungary Between Two Empires* recasts the Hungarian lands as a largely peripheral battleground, an early modern killing-field for the constantly warring Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. In a way, the book is an ode to the resilience of the Hungarian people, who were able to continue creating and producing in the midst of untold suffering. Pálffy wisely divides the book into two century-long sections, one on the “direction seeking” years after the catastrophic Battle of Mohács (1526) and the other on the “Janus-faced” seventeenth-century, a period of decay and rejuvenation for the war-weary Hungarians. Pálffy’s retelling of early modern Hungarian history, the first of its kind in many years with an English translation, will spur experts and newcomers alike to question long-held assumptions about a crucial period in Hungary’s historical development.

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In the first part of the book, "Hungary After Mohács: A Century of Direction Seeking, 1526-1606," Pálffy reexamines the turbulent years following the partition of medieval Hungary in 1526. Here, the reader is first introduced to the post-Mohács Transylvanian vassal state, which, contrary to popular beliefs, should not be considered a "... continuation of the medieval Hungarian state" or, as some bold historians have termed it, the "Hungarian national kingdom" (43). Pálffy rightly points out that this is an anachronism, as in sixteenth-century Europe there were no national kingdoms. These interventions are a regular occurrence throughout the text and illustrate the author's commitment to challenging readers' assumptions about early modern Hungary. The strongest parts of this section, and frankly, of the entire book, are those that circumvent dated, top-down approaches to historical analysis, focusing instead on the lives of "everyday" people living in the formerly united Hungarian lands. Of course, this is a heavy lift for historians of early modern Europe, but Pálffy does an admirable job excavating these experiences throughout the text. For instance, in his chapter on Hungarian society in the sixteenth-century, he described the sacrifices made by those occupying the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder; namely, the serfs and landless peasants. As Pálffy observed, "it was in their ranks that destruction brought by the sultan's or royal troops took the most victims, and they were the most affected by the arson, starvation, and epidemics these troops brought in their wake" (69). In a book marketed to those who may not be as familiar with the socio-political intricacies of early modern Central Europe, these moments help anchor a narrative that can sometimes feel somewhat dry and inaccessible. Perhaps due, in part, to translation issues, the chapters detailing the military exploits of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans are particularly difficult to follow, even for a specialist. These sections accost the reader with a rapid barrage of names, places, and dates that far too often confound rather than elucidate. The maps and illustrations help to make the content somewhat more digestible, but, ultimately, the layperson may be inclined to skip or skim from time to time. Indeed, it is at these moments that the text feels more like a college-level textbook rather than a volume intended for those "... less au fait with the history of the region" (3).

The second part of *Hungary Between Two Empires*, titled "Decay and Rejuvenation: The Janus-Faced Seventeenth Century, 1606-1711," explores the mercurial years following the Long Turkish War (1593-1606), a thirteen-year conflict between the Ottoman Empire and a Habsburg-led alliance between several Christian European states that ultimately resulted in a stalemate. During this period, the Hungarian estates were rejuvenated politically, the Hungarian language became further unified and began to blossom, and the noble counties flourished. Yet, these trends toward renewal were complicated by a "... permanent war footing often akin to a war of religion, by a decay in public life, and by the large-scale militarization of society" (2). Here, Pálffy once again endeavors to complicate certain preconceived ideas about the seventeenth-century that were long promulgated by Hungarian historiography. Indeed, the popular notion of a long peace turns out to be only partially true, because, although the Habsburgs and Ottomans were busy elsewhere, constant civil war at home stymied sustained socio-economic and cultural development. In Pálffy's analysis, Transylvania represented the Hungarian seventeenth-century in miniature, experiencing massive swings in terms of political and economic stability. Emeric Thököly (1657-1705), in particular, does not fare well in Pálffy's examination. Today, Thököly is remembered as a great anti-Habsburg crusader and national unifier, but in *Hungary Between Two Empires*, this leader of the short-lived state of Central Hungary and one-time Transylvanian prince is recast as the self-interested leader of the "craziest and most pitiful" Ottoman vassal, whose tenure should be viewed as one of the "... low points of Hungarian history" (164).

According to Pálffy, the renegade Thököly ultimately weakened the northern and eastern expanses of an increasingly destabilized Hungarian territory. Beyond the political situation in Transylvania, Pálffy's later chapter on demographic trends is especially strong, situating broader shifts in the Hungarian population within the larger context of the volatile seventeenth-century, and his exploration of social reorganization is compelling.

Despite its shortcomings, *Hungary Between Two Empires* is a refreshing reevaluation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hungary. Filling a glaring lacuna in the English-language literature on late medieval and early modern Hungary, Pálffy's study critically challenges modern scholarship in ways that feel both timely and relevant given the troubling political climate in modern Hungary and much of the West. While *Hungary Between Two Empires* may frustrate laypeople at times, specialists will certainly appreciate this nuanced take on a period of Hungarian history that still resonates today.