

A visszatért Erdély 1940–1944 [Transylvania Returned, 1940–1944].
By Balázs Ablonczy. Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2011. 280 pp.

Although this relatively short period of history was to determine the fates of Transylvanian Hungarians for a long time, according to Balázs Ablonczy Hungarian historians have nonetheless handled it with “remarkable modesty” (p.13). Due to the lack of basic research and the negligible number of related studies, this period has remained something of a “gray” patch.¹ The increasing interest historians have begun to take in the era since the fall of communism in Hungary, however, and the research that has been done over the course of the past few decades has brought new information and interconnections to light, or at the very least offered a more nuanced understanding of old interpretations.²

These new results and insights are the main focus of Balázs Ablonczy’s recent volume, published in 2011. According to the author, his work “is not the thorough monograph that Hungarian historiography has badly needed for so long.” (p.15.) The volume is essentially a summary of previous knowledge of the topic complemented with the findings of Ablonczy’s own research. The genre itself attests to this: although it was written with the demanding fastidiousness of a work of scholarship, its easy-flowing style and the small number of footnotes give the reader the impression that he or she is reading a book for a general readership. This is also suggested by the slightly unusual prologue (entitled “Two accidents”), which doesn’t quite seem to correspond to the topic of the book, but which prepares the reader for a less rigid manner of presentation.

The thirteen chapters of the book offer a chronological presentation of the four years in question, but they address the most important questions of

1 Gábor Egry uses this characterization in his book on the history of the Transylvanian Party. Gábor Egry, *Az erdélyiség „színeváltozása”. Kísérlet az Erdélyi Párt identitásának és identitáspolitikájának elemzésére 1940–1944.* [An Analysis of the Identity and the Identity Politics of the Transylvanian Party] (Politikatörténeti füzetek XXV) (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2008).

2 One finds a thorough summary of the secondary literature in the Transylvanian Hungarian Database: Tamás Sárándi and András Tóth-Bartos, eds. *“Kis magyar világ” Észak-Erdély 1940–1944 között* [“Little Hungarian World” Northern Transylvania between 1940 and 1944]. <http://www.adatbank.ro/belso.php?alk=66&k=5>, accessed December 17, 2012. For a further survey of the secondary literature and research see András Tóth-Bartos, “Észak-Erdély 1940–1944. Szakirodalmi áttekintés” [Northern Transylvania 1940–1944. Survey of the Secondary Literature], in *Határhelyzetek III*, ed. István Fábri and Emőke Kötél. (Budapest: Balassi Intézet Márton Áron Szakkollégium, 2010), 326–46.

these fifty months thematically. The historic antecedents are introduced in the second chapter (entitled “The Fight for Transylvania”), from the nineteenth century up to the Second Vienna Award. Ablonczy examines issues that served as “precursors” to the politics of Transylvania during the era in question. The most significant of these questions concern the formation of pre-war notions of Transylvania, the efforts to further Hungarian nationalist goals before 1918, debates over territorial revision, and—to use Ablonczy’s wording—the triple (political, economic, and educational-cultural) discrimination endured by Transylvanian Hungarians as a consequence of Romanian nation building. It is essential to present these problems, since in the course of implementing Hungarian national politics in Transylvania following the Vienna Award those responsible for shaping policy often drew on the nation building strivings of the pre-war period (for instance in questions regarding the possession of estates), but they also placed considerable emphasis on the task of remedying the grievances suffered by Transylvanian Hungarians.

The second half of the book examines the four years of Hungarian government in Transylvania in detail. Ablonczy devotes separate chapters to the most important problems. In his analysis of the formation of the military administration following the occupation of the area, he offers an unbiased comparison of the atrocities committed by the Romanian and Hungarian armies respectively, some of which resulted in bloodshed. He also deals separately with the economic and nationality policies that were implemented by the military commanders who led the counties and districts. Three of the chapters address questions of economic policy. In order to compensate for the failings of the pre-1918 liberal governments and help remedy some of the grievances that had been suffered by Hungarians when they had lived as members of a minority in the Romanian state, particular emphasis was given to the economic development of Transylvania in the interests of reducing differences between regions. The program of investment and financial aid (the chapter entitled “Bureaus, fields, and electric wires”) had two principal aims: first, the revitalization of the economy (agricultural and industrial activities, professional training) and the promotion of social policy and second, the improvement of infrastructure (“Paths beyond Sylvan Lands”). The railway line between Déda and Szeretfalva offers an example of the latter. Built in record time, it linked the Székely Land, an area that since the shift of borders in 1940 had been left without any railway connection, to the larger railway network. One could also mention the Székely Land Electrical Works, which

considerably furthered industrial development and the spread of electric power in the Székely counties. According to Ablonczy, during the four years in question the Hungarian state devoted an amount of money to investment in Northern Transylvania (the region that had been re-annexed in accordance with the Second Vienna Award) equal roughly to the state budget for an entire year.

This section also contains a chapter dealing with tourism. The title (The Hungarian Switzerland) is not incidental, since in Transylvania, Switzerland was considered an example to be followed, in particular in the field of tourism as a source of great economic potential. During those four years, the improvement of the tourist industry was handled with great care: hotels and hospices were built, roads with significant touristic importance were renovated, and great emphasis was put on promoting tourism. According to Ablonczy's observations, this also functioned as implicit political propaganda the effects of which are still palpable: the touristic profile that was created during the period (the sights of the Kalotaszeg region, the city of Cluj, and the Székely Land) continues to determine the image many Hungarians have of Transylvania today.

The author discusses the political history of Northern Transylvania in six chapters, at least if one includes the last chapter, entitled "Frontal passage" (the title is a pun, since in Hungarian it can refer to weather or to battle), which deals with the events that took place in the Transylvanian arena of war. The political interests of the region were formulated by the Transylvanian Party. Ablonczy carefully details the history of the party (in a chapter entitled "Fields of force"), its relationship with the government and other parties, as well as its regional policy, which gave expression to a kind of local identity referred to as the "Transylvanian spirit." Although this could be seen simply as a form of regionalism, on the local level the aim was to achieve dominance over the rival Transylvanian ethnic groups (Romanians and Jews) with the state machinery of a ruling nation. Ablonczy gives particular consideration to the presentation of the various endeavors that were undertaken or promoted with the intention of strengthening the nation, the logic of which shaped religious and educational policy ("Church and school"), demographic policy ("The age of obsessions"), and economic policy ("Life at the border castle"). The reader also learns about the measures that in many cases were accompanied by atrocities ("Bitter years"). Here Ablonczy discusses the conditions of Hungarians living in southern Transylvania, whose everyday lives were embittered by the practice of

a reciprocal kind of ethnic policy.³ He also describes the discriminative measures that were taken against Transylvanian Jewish communities and Hungarian citizens who had “returned” but who were regarded as Jewish, not to mention the Transylvanian Roma, and finally the deportations that affected a significant proportion of the population of the region.

This volume is not Ablonczy’s first publication⁴ on Northern Transylvania, although his main field of study is not the history of Transylvania or the ethnic minorities, but rather the social and cultural-historical background of the Hungarian nation building efforts of the interwar period. In his monograph on Pál Teleki he gave a thorough analysis of the processes that took place in Transylvania, focusing on the problems that personally or indirectly affected the prime minister. In another essay on tourism he offers a more radical interpretation of “Transylvania imagery” pointing out that Transylvanian tourism promoted “prominent national interests,”⁵ in other words, it served as an excellent basis for often discriminative nationalist measures. The essential thesis of *Transylvania Returned* builds on the train of thought in the aforementioned two works. Thus here too Ablonczy gives particular attention to the role of Pál Teleki in giving voice to the problems of Transylvania and designing long-term, extensive programs intended to help address these problems. Furthermore, Ablonczy emphasizes that the question of Northern Transylvania constituted the last attempt to create a Transylvanian Hungarian national space. The Second Vienna Award offered an opportunity to put the Hungarians of Transylvania in a socially and economically more advantageous position. In the background to this was the realization that the questions that were important to the Hungarians

3 The political division of Transylvania into a northern part belonging to Hungary and a southern part belonging to Romania exercised a considerable influence on domestic politics on both sides of the border. Thus in the case of both Hungarian and Romanian politics, nationality policies were influenced by the principle of reciprocity. The circumstances of the Romanians of Northern Transylvania changed depending on how the Hungarians of Southern Transylvania were treated, and vice versa. Repression was answered with repression on both sides of the border.

4 Balázs Ablonczy’s works on this subject: *Teleki Pál* [Pál Teleki] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2005), 456–91; “Teleki Pál ismeretlen memoranduma az erdélyi kérdéstről 1940” [Pál Teleki’s Unknown Memorandum on the Transylvanian Question 1940]. *Pro Minoritate* no. autumn-winter (2004): 64–85; “Teleki Pál nemzetéről és társadalomról – a visszacsatolások előtt és után” [Pál Teleki on the Nation and on Society – Before and After the Re-annexations], in *A nemzet a társadalomban* [The Nation in Society], ed. Csilla Fedinec, 151–73. (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2004); “Védkunyhó. Idegenforgalmi fejlesztés és nemzetépítés Észak-Erdélyben 1940–1944 között” [Hikers’ Hut. Tourist Development and Nation Building in Northern Transylvania, 1940–1944], *Történelmi Szemle* 50, no. 4. (2008): 507–33.

5 Ablonczy, “Védkunyhó,” 528.

of Transylvania could only be solved from a position of power.⁶ The system of public support, economic and social assistance, and educational policies all served this goal, as did for instance the granting of official permission to take certain jobs, the issue of licenses to pursue a trade, etc. According to Ablonczy, however, the goal of achieving Hungarian supremacy did not mean forceful assimilation.⁷ Hungarian hegemony may have been the goal, but in a multiethnic state. The measures were usually intended simply to minimize the economic and political power of the nationalities (p.165; p.231).

The omnipresent nationality policies and the dominance of public discourse related to it resulted in some contradictory situations. One could well ask, for instance, to what extent the references to national goals became one of the tools for survival in a world in which everyday life had been embittered by war. One might also ask to what extent this nation building spirit permeated the rigid practices of administration that were characteristic of the system, or to what extent bureaucratic practice or economic interests prevailed in the resolution of issues seen as important from the perspective of national concerns.

There is very little scholarship on these questions. The concise histories that were written in the 1960s cannot be ignored, in spite of their ideological biases, but they only address specific questions of detail (regarding the left-wing, for instance, or revision).⁸ Most of the more recent scholarship dealing with the

6 The politics of economic revitalization offers a good example of this, as does the question of the treatment of the areas in which Transylvanian Hungarians lived scattered. For instance a survey based on questionnaires was ordered to allow an examination of the circumstances of Hungarians in areas in which Romanians constituted the majority (for more on this see Pál Péter Tóth: *Szórásban* [Scattered] (Budapest: Püski, 1999), but they saw serious potential for the strengthening of the Hungarian presence in the policies regarding the possession of estates (for instance the purchase of land and the creation of land divisions) or state-directed resettlements in the interests of creating an ethnically Hungarian corridor linking the Székely Land and the so-called Alföld, the lowland region of Hungary.

7 Nationality policies that were based on the hopes of complete revision were characteristic for the most part of the military administration that was developed following the entry into Northern Transylvania of the Hungarian army. Some of the measures that were implemented are clear manifestations of the desire to return to the pre-1918 state of affairs. This depended primarily on the personal decisions of individual commanders. Following the introduction of a civil administration most of the measures were rescinded. For more on this topic see Tamás Sárándi, “Kisebbségpolitika a közigazgatási gyakorlatban a katonai közigazgatás idején Észak-Erdélyben” [Minority Policy in Administrative Practice at the Time of the Military Administration in Northern Transylvania], *Limes* 23, no. 2 (2010): 75–95. After this, nationality policies were shaped by a politics that favored Hungarian national interests, seeking first and foremost to strengthen the position of the Hungarians and bring conflicts with the nationalities to an end. See Gábor Egrý: “Tükörpolitika” [Mirror politics], *Limes* 23, no. 2 (2010): 97–111.

8 Dániel Csatári, *Forgószélben. A magyar–román viszony 1940–1945* [In a Whirlwind. Hungarian-Romanian Relations 1940–1944] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968); Loránt Tilkovszky, *Revízió és nemzetiségpolitika*

problems of Northern Transylvania is also limited to specific questions, seen primarily from the perspective of political history. At the same time, there are no case studies that examine the activity of Transylvanian Hungarian politicians from a national perspective. Except for the cooperatives and individual financial institutions, we have very little information regarding the network of institutions that was built at the time or the relationships and conflicts between the central and local institutions. Our knowledge of the economic and social processes that took place at the time is also limited. For example, with the exception of a few individual counties we know little regarding the politics of pecuniary assistance that was evolving at the time, and we have no larger view of the national or regional structure. Very few case studies have been done that offer any deep insight into specific local problems. This book contains some attempts to address this. In addition to the aforementioned case study on tourism, the case of the pioneers (district road-surveyors, road laborers) is also interesting, both from the perspective of minority politics and as a point of departure for future socio-historical analyses. The history of the Székely Land Electrical Works would also merit separate analysis, as it would offer an illustrative example of the interconnections and conflicts between local economic initiatives, efforts on the part of the state to modernize, and the business politics of large enterprises.

The book does reflect the lacunae of the secondary literature upon which is based, since the gap left unaddressed by previous scholarship is too vast to be bridged by a short summary. However, it constitutes an essential contribution to the secondary literature on Northern Transylvania. It offers a useful point of departure for specialists on the subject, as well as an opportunity for the larger reading public to familiarize itself with an impartial and highly readable account of the “little Hungarian world” of Transylvania between 1940 and 1944, a world that was often rife with paradox and contradiction.

Translated by Thomas Cooper.

András Tóth-Bartos

Magyarországon 1938–1941 [Revision and Nationality Policy in Hungary 1938–1941] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967), 255–334.