

A review article:

The American Adventures of Hungary's Holy Crown

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Tibor Glant. *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandjai, 1945-1978* [The American Adventures of the Holy Crown, 1945-1978]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1997. 181 pages.

The Holy Crown of Hungary — also known as Saint Stephen's Crown — has been in the centre of political controversy for several decades. This was especially true in the late 1970s, when President Carter's decision to return the Crown to its homeland — after three decades in American "protection" or "captivity" — precipitated a veritable storm of protest by a significant segment of the Hungarian political emigration in the Western World.

This held particularly true for the Hungarian political emigration in the United States, whose members were most immediately affected by the Crown's repatriation. Their protracted and often desperate protest activities are chronicled at length in the documentary collection compiled by Attila L. Simontsits in his *The Last Battle for Saint Stephen's Crown* (1983).¹

Ever since the Holy Crown's return to Hungary, scholars have been churning out articles and books about its origins and its artistic composition. They have also reassessed its role in Hungarian history, particularly in light of the "Doctrine of the Holy Crown," which had assigned to the Holy Crown an unusual role in the constitutional development of Hungary. In point of fact, ever since the fourteenth century — according to some, ever since St. Stephen's reign in the early eleventh century — the Holy Crown had been made into the symbol and representative of royal power, and even of Hungarian statehood itself. In line

with this doctrine, laws were passed and judicial decisions were made not in the name of the king, but rather in the name of the Holy Crown. Moreover, no king was viewed as the legitimate ruler of Hungary unless and until crowned by the Holy Crown that generally came to be referred to as "St. Stephen's Crown."²

While many of the books published during the last two decades since the Crown's repatriation are useful,³ most of them are too specialized for the average reader. Moreover, with the exception of Sándor Háhn's *A Szent Korona útja és sorsa* [The Path and Fate of the Holy Crown], most of them also devote relatively little attention to the Crown's sojourn in America, which was only one of the Crowns several similar tribulations during the past one thousand years.

The situation is very different with the volume under review. Tibor Glant's *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandjai* [The American Adventures of the Holy Crown] is a delightful book devoted specifically to the latter topic. The author is a learned scholar, who has approached his topic in the spirit of detached objectivity. His book, therefore, is a scholarly work, which at the same time is oriented not only to the specialist, but also to the general reader. It is based partially upon archival sources, partially upon published primary and secondary sources, and partially upon personal interviews with individuals who have been involved in the Holy Crown's arrival to the United States and its return to Hungary.

Glant's *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandjai* is divided into eight chapters, which cover the Crown's tempestuous sojourn from Budapest to Fort Knox and back in the period between 1944 and 1978. The first chapter discusses the Crown's stormy departure from Hungary and how it got into American hands in the months following the World War II (pp. 19-33). The next three chapters narrate and analyze the changing relationship between Hungary and the United States during the three postwar decades, right up to President Jimmy Carter's decision to return the Crown to the country which in those days was generally viewed as the land of "goulash communism" (pp. 35-85). Chapter five is devoted to the somewhat quixotic efforts of the Hungarian political immigrants and their American allies to prevent the Crown's repatriation (pp. 87-102), while chapters six and seven treat the events surrounding the actual repatriation process itself, both in the United States and in Hungary (pp. 103-131). The final chapter describes the Crown's reception by the Hungarian public, the views and the fate of the main players in this repatriation process, and further developments in Hungarian-American relations in light of the Holy Crown's return to Hungary (pp. 133-141). Tibor Glant's book is supplemented by a series of relevant and useful photographs (pp. 145-167), endnotes (pp. 169-173), sources and bibliography (pp. 175-178), as well as an essay in which the author expresses his gratitude to those who have helped him in the realization of this undertaking (pp. 179-181). The main text is preceded by a Preface from the pen of Ferenc Esztergályos (b. 1927), the former Hungarian ambassador to the United States, who himself had played a considerable role in the Crown's repatriation (pp.

9-11); and also by the author's own Foreword, which itself is in the nature of a short historical essay (pp. 13-17).

All in all Tibor Glant's *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandjai* is a marvelous little volume, which is well-researched, displays the objectivity of a learned scholar, and is written in a style that makes it read almost like a novel. As is always true with scholarly books, however, there are a few questionable points in this volume as well, but they detract very little from the essential high quality of this work.

One of these questions has to do with author's interpretation of the Doctrine of the Holy Crown, which, according to him, developed in the above-described form only during the interwar years (pp. 13-14). This view does have some validity, for the Horthy Regime did in fact expand and amplify this doctrine so as to place it in the service of its revisionist goals — a phenomenon which I have also noted some two decades ago in my *Modern Hungarian Historiography*.⁵ Yet, one should not forget that this doctrine had evolved already in the fourteenth century under the Anjou dynasty, and that it had been codified essentially in identical form by Palatine István Werbőczy in his *Tripartitum* in 1514.

One may also question Tibor Glant's assertion to the effect that only American archivists call Hungary's Holy Crown the "Crown of St. Stephen" (p. 14). It is undoubtedly true that American scholars and publicists generally refer to Hungary's sacred relic by those terms, but they do so only because they have borrowed this expression from established Hungarian practice. Hungary's Holy Crown had been known as St. Stephen's Crown at least from the thirteenth century onward, and only in the late nineteenth century did scholars begin to question its direct link to the country's first Christian king. But even most of them believed that the upper half did reach back to King St. Stephen, and only the lower half was a later addition — a view that this still held today by a number of scholars.⁶ Therefore, calling the Holy Crown of Hungary "St. Stephen's Crown" is not necessarily wrong, and it certainly is not the invention of American archivists. This appellation is based on long-standing Hungarian traditions that reach back almost to the very beginnings of written historical sources in Hungary. As such, its use would still be justifiable even if art historians were to prove conclusively that the Holy Crown is a later creation and therefore not identical with the crown that King Stephen had received from Pope Sylvester II in the year 1000 A.D.

Although understandable, asking ambassador Ferenc Esztergályos to write the preface to this volume may not have been the wisest decision on the part of the author. This is so primarily because the former ambassador's involvement in the Crown's repatriation placed him into the first rank of the adversaries of those who opposed its return to communist Hungary. Thus, by giving Esztergályos such a prominent place in his book — despite the ambassador's positive role in the affair and the respect that he had shown toward this holy relic — Glant may well be accused by the representatives of the Hungarian political emigration of

being less than objective in his treatment of the events surrounding this repatriation. Signs of this disapproval have already surfaced, and they will undoubtedly increase in the future, even though the book itself is a model of historical objectivity.⁷

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All in all, Tibor Glant has written a worthy volume that deserves our praise and our appreciation. It reflects pedantic research, meticulous scholarship, and a captivating style that makes it difficult to put it down. It has much to offer even to the specialists, and as such it deserves the recognition and support of the Hungarian scholarly world, as well as of the Hungarian reading public. I recommend it very highly to everyone who is interested in modern Hungarian, Central European, and even American diplomatic history. I also hope that the book will soon appear in a slightly revised English language edition, so as to make it available at American and other English-language universities.

NOTES

1. *The Last Battle for Saint Stephen's Crown. A Chronological Documentation*, compiled by Attila L. Simonisits (Toronto: Weller Publishing Co., 1983).

2. Concerning the development of the Doctrine of the Holy Crown, see the following writings: Ernő Nagy, "Korona" [Crown] in *Magyar Jogi Lexikon*, ed. Dezső Márkus, 6 vols. (Budapest: Pallas Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság, 1898-1907), vol. 5, pp. 35-38; Ferenc Eckhart, *A szent korona eszme* [The Doctrine of the Holy Crown] (Budapest, 1941); Márton Sarlós, "A 'szentkorona tan' kialakulásához" [Concerning the Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Crown], in *Jogtudományi Közlöny*, vol. 15 (1960), pp. 557-600; József Kardos, "Az Eckhart-vita és a szentkorona tan" [The Eckhart controversy and the Doctrine of the Holy Crown], in *Századok*, vol. 103 (1969), pp. 1104-1117; and István Kocsis, *A Szent Korona tana. Multja, jelene, jövője* [The Doctrine of the Holy Crown. Its Past, its Present, its Future] (Budapest, 1995).

3. The best of these books include the following: Bertényi Iván, *A magyar korona története* [History of the Hungarian Crown] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1978), 4th enlarged edition, 1996; *A korona kilenc évszázada. Történelmi források a magyar koronáról* [The Crown's Nine Centuries. Historical Sources about the Hungarian Crown], ed. Tamás Katona (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1979); Kálmán Benda and Erik Fügedi, *A magyar korona regénye* [The Story of the Hungarian Crown] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1979); Éva Kovács and Zsuzsa Lovag, *A magyar koronázási jelvények* [Hungarian Royal Insignia] (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1980); Zsuzsa Lovag, "A korona-kutatás vadhajtsái" [The Wildings of Crown Research], in *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* (1986) nos. 1-2, pp. 35-48; Lajos Csomor, *Magyarország Szent Koronája*

[Hungary's Holy Crown] (Vaja: Vay Ádám Múzeum Baráti Köre, 1988); and István Kocsis, *A Szent Korona tana*, *cit.* (see note 2).

4. Sándor Háhn, *A Szent Korona útja és sorsa a Királyi Vártól Fort Knoxig, 1945-1978* [The Path and Fate of the Holy Crown from the Royal Castle to Fort Knox, 1945-1978] (New York: A szerző kiadása, 1984).

5. Steven Béla Várdy, *Modern Hungarian Historiography* (New York: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 179-183.

6. Among the first scholars to question the Crown's connection to King St. Stephen was the noted positivist historian Gyula Pauler (1841-1903) in his *A magyar nemzet története az Árpád-házi királyok alatt* [History of the Hungarian Nation under the Árpadian Kings] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1899). His views, however, were immediately attacked by the equally influential János Karácsonyi (1858-1929) in his *Hogyan lett Szent István Koronája a magyar szent korona felső részévé* [How did St. Stephen's Crown Become the Upper Part of the Hungarian Holy Crown?] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1907). For the various modern views see *Korai Magyar Történeti Lexikon*, editor-in-chief Gyula Kristó (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994), p. 634; and Steven Béla Várdy, *Historical Dictionary of Hungary* (Lanham & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1997), pp. 338-339.

7. Tibor Glant has already been accused of political bias and a lack of objectivity in a personal letter written by the Hungarian-American political activist, István Gereben of Washington, D.C., who denounced the author for pursuing a path that reminded him "of the tone, ideological orientation, and... exploitive manipulations of the Leninist Seminars" he had experienced during his student days at a university in Hungary. Cf. István Gereben's letter to Tibor Glant, March 21, 1998, which was e-mailed to me by Glant on March 24, 1998.