

**A NEW ENGLISH-LANGUAGE JOURNAL:  
*THE HUNGARIAN HISTORICAL REVIEW***

BÉLA TOMKA

University of Szeged, Hungary  
E-mail: tomka@hist.u-szeged.hu

Apart from university departments, research institutes and learned societies, the most important institutional preconditions of the emergence and continuance of an academic discipline include specialised scholarly journals. The professional orientation and academic quality of the latter determine to a great extent the development of the given discipline. That is why all such endeavours are worth attention. The academic yield can be even more considerable, and thereby the interest is especially justified, if the journal's language is English – as in the case of the recently launched *Hungarian Historical Review* (HHR). Obviously, this short review cannot aim to describe in detail this periodical, and, in particular, the contents of the issues already published or forthcoming. Rather, four major points related to the publication will be addressed. First, some basic facts about the journal will be reviewed, focusing on the institution and people behind it. Secondly, the antecedents of the journal will be investigated, as, given the fairly painful experience with English-language historical periodicals in Hungary, this new initiative can be properly understood and assessed in the context of the forerunners. Thirdly, the goals and the functions of the journal will be dealt with, including the inherent pitfalls of the publication. And, finally, based on the first two double issues, we will briefly reflect on some of the most important problems the editors have to face during their everyday work.

As to the basic facts about the journal, the HHR was launched by the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) in late 2012, and is published quarterly. Two double issues were published first, one on urban history and another on migration history. They were followed by four single issues: on the Reformation, on the Angevin Dynasty in medieval Central Europe, on ethnicity and borders, and, finally, on the 17<sup>th</sup> century history of the principality of Transylvania. Later issues included the history of the family and a theme called “fabricating history”. The journal also has a book review section which is a quite neglected genre in Hungarian historiography. The Editor-in-Chief is Pál Fodor, Director of the Institute of History (HAS) and a well-known expert on Ottoman history. The editors, Gabriella Erdélyi, Sándor Horváth, Judit Klement, Veronika Novák and

Tamás Pálosfalvi belong to the younger generation of historians. An international advisory board and an editorial board also support the editors. The journal is available online as well under: <http://www.hunghist.org>. Two short remarks seem to be substantiated here. It has been a long-held view among Hungarian historians that the Institute of History has not properly fulfilled the task entrusted to it. Despite the fact that it has a critical mass of scholars who do not have the teaching load with which university professors have to cope, and thus, are well suited to carry out larger projects, such as editing handbooks, or, as a matter of fact, publishing an English-language journal, the results have been fairly modest in this respect for the last couple of decades. Launching this journal can be regarded as a promising sign of the Institute's new leadership's dedication to take on these responsibilities. Additionally, another positive development is that the journal's editorial board is laudably diverse as far as the institutional affiliations of their members are concerned – in contrast with earlier practices in the Institute and the major forums of Hungarian historical scholarship in general.

Talking about the forerunners of the journal is important in the case of the HHR, since, in my view, the earlier efforts still haunt any new attempts to establish an English-language historical periodical in Hungary. As suggested earlier, the history of the English-language historical journals in Hungary is a battered one. The *Acta Historica* of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was published from 1951 to 1989 partly in English (with some articles in other languages, such as German, Russian and French). The 35 volumes that were published altogether seem to be an impressive achievement. However, the journal had some particularities which prevented it from becoming a well-established and reputed periodical. It was basically a replica of articles that came out in other academic journals in Hungarian. Moreover, the hierarchy of the HAS largely determined who could publish in the *Acta Historica*, that is, no independent editorial policy existed. It was circulated irregularly, with huge delays, and after a long agony, it ceased to exist in 1989.

The two other, more recent forerunners, the *Danubian Historical Studies* and the *History and Society in Central Europe* were of much higher quality, but, at the same time, they were very short-lived, released between 1987 and 1988, and between 1991 and 1994, respectively. In fact, only a couple of issues came out in both cases. These failures largely contributed to the fact that no historians, group of historians, or publishers have had the courage to launch a new initiative for the last two decades. Consequently, the editors of the new journal cannot rely on high-quality and long-sustained antecedents, they have to start with the publication from scratch.

Why is this new journal needed? For many, the answer might seem obvious: making the results of Hungarian historiography available for a wider, international public. This was what several of the agencies or institutions providing financial sup-

port for the HHR probably have in mind, and this rationale appears in the leaflet of the journal as well. Even though this is a fully legitimate goal, the realization of the aim will obviously not be enough for producing a journal that is worth being followed regularly. We can even go further: if the realization of this goal were to dominate the editorial work, it might be harmful for the internationalization of Hungarian historical research altogether. To put it bluntly: colleagues who are not able to publish their papers in international journals might try to place their pieces here by using their positions in the hierarchy of the HAS, as happened in the case of the *Acta Historica* several decades ago. Thus, the HHR would become a surrogate for real internationalization. This danger was already expressed by László Kontler, member of the advisory board, on the occasion of launching the journal.

How to avoid this? The most important means is opening up to authors beyond the Hungarian borders by initiating debates on topics that have broader, regional or even global relevance and might attract authors from beyond Hungary as well. This is a clear balancing act: instead of simply reflecting the present state of Hungarian scholarship, the editors have to transcend national discourses, introduce novel themes, set agendas and thus standards. It is promising that the two issues published so far have clearly represented that direction, and I know from personal communication with the editors that they want to attract even more authors from the international community of scholars.

Besides finding authors and reviewers as well as promoting the journal successfully, and building an effective editorial board, there are two important issues which necessitate further editorial policy planning. First, the editors opted for publishing exclusively thematic issues. This policy has several advantages such as sourcing out a great deal of the editorial work for conference organizers. However, it also makes the journal less lively and prevents the editors from responding to current scholarly debates and creating a regular forum for critical-minded historians. So, I would argue for a combination of thematic issues and regular issues. Second, the editors seem to opt for a subscription based journal. I think that a limited open access journal might be a more viable solution. This model does not repel the libraries which can only be realistically regarded as subscribers for that particular journal; at the same time a wider public could read the journal, which, in the long run, will yield more institutional subscribers as well.

The latter remarks should be considered as humble suggestions, and they do not dwarf the enormous and excellent work the editors have done so far. Rather, I wish merely to suggest that good journals are always under construction. They are constructed by the editors, and first of all, by authors – that is, all of us. The future fate of the HHR largely depends on the willingness of inventive historians specializing on East Central European topics to contribute to the journal. There are clear signs that the editors will attract this species.

