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Border Territory Targeted by Rival National Narratives – The Burgenland-debate between the Austrian and Hungarian Historical Writings (1918/1921–1945)<sup>1</sup>

Border regions of nation states have always played an important role in the process of national identity construction. Nation as an imagined community relies both on territory and history. Borders clearly separate the national community from the Other, the „Us” from „Them”. But borders are contested as frequent as identities. This means that usually two or more nations compete for the „historical rights” to a border region. It was an important task of the national historical writing in the 20th century to „nationalize” the border regions, this way openly challenging the identity of a neighbouring country. The Alsace-Lorraine or the Transylvania question clearly proves that debates over border regions ignited bitter conflicts in history. Border regions were essential and at the same time debated parts of the national master narratives, but especially this contested nature of regions gives a great opportunity to analyze the relationship between historical writing and national identity.

The region Burgenland has been transferred to Austria in 1921. After the First World War the country was compensated with a territory that had previously been a part of Hungary. Since the „birth” of the region it has been heavily contested mostly by Hungarian, sometimes Czech historians. Of course, the Austrian historical writing was eager to integrate Burgenland into national histories. The aim of my study is to present a comparative and transnational history of the Austrian and Hungarian historical professions and to show how historians across different borders participated in creating histories based on nation, empire, region or ethnicity. The case of Burgenland in the interwar period is a good example of identity construction through historical writing. I will identify the main actors and institutes of knowledge production and show the most important elements of rival national narratives. I intend to concentrate on certain questions and topics that emerged during the historical discourses. Who has even the right to write about the history of Burgenland/West-Hungary, which has been subjected to both Hungarian and Austrian rule in the course of its history? Was it the political identity or the ethnicity of the population that mattered the most in the case of the border city Sopron (Ödenburg)? Which nation can „claim” the famous musicians, poets of the region?

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Geographers and historians repeatedly posed questions like what kind of regional character does Burgenland have; Eastern, Western or mixed? The role of minorities (Croats, Jews, Gypsies) was also discussed. As indicated before, my study is a transnational history, however, it will also rely on the methods of comparative history as both sides must be analyzed. This is the reason I emphasize both transnational and comparative elements in my study.

Such historical debates also offer an insight into the different logics of knowledge production. A closer examination of the Burgenland-debate can show that the professional legitimacy of Austrian/Hungarian historians was repeatedly challenged. Although these historians wrote their work according to professional methods (they relied on source criticism), the meaning of this professionalism was frequently discussed. In these heated debates it is particularly visible that historians used scholarly language (they often mentioned that relying on sources and being „objective” is an important characteristic of a historian) even in those polemics that could not be decided alone by rational-cognitive means. For example, one cannot decide the antagonism between political, state-centered „civic” nationalism and ethnic/cultural nationalism by relying only on rational arguments.

## Nationalizing border cities: Sopron

Two cities, Sopron (in German: Ödenburg) and Eisenstadt (in Hungarian: Kismarton) were of utmost importance for the historians standing on the different sides of the border. These cities served as popular topics of national historical narratives, but they also functioned as centres organizing historical research. Historians working for city libraries, archives, museums and local journals were keen to participate in debates about this border region. For example, both the leading archivist of Eisenstadt (Heinrich Kunnert) and the director of the Archive of the City of Sopron (Jenő Házi) joined the heated discussions about Burgenland.

The problem of Sopron was a complex case because, after the war, this border city was promised to Austria, following the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye 1919. However, the Venice Protocol (signed on October 13, 1921) allowed that the fate of Sopron can be decided with a referendum. The referendum took place in December 1921, and the majority of the local population voted for Hungary. After this political event, two entirely different historical interpretations emerged.

The Austrian historical writing contested the results of the referendum (declaring it as „fraud”) and argued that the city has an essentially German ethnic character. The booklet of

Viktor Miltschinsky, *Das Verbrechen von Ödenburg* (1922) stated that Sopron is a part of an ancient German territory and the assimilation policy of Hungary between 1867 and 1918 (the period of the dualist Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) was not successful here.<sup>2</sup> The sorrow over the loss of Sopron is clearly present in the writings of Otto Aull, too. A school teacher in Wiener Neustadt, Aull was one of the most famous local historians in Burgenland at that time. He eagerly attacked the Hungarian national position in newspaper articles and books. In the 1920's he repeatedly argued that Austria has a historical right to Sopron, because the majority of it's population belonged to the German „Volk”.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to this position, Hungarian historians, jurists and geographers argued that the territory now called Burgenland has always been an integral part of the Hungarian state and ethnic identity did not matter in this region's history. One of the first books celebrating the referendum of Sopron tried to defend the concept of an integral Hungarian nation-state. This volume (*Sopron. Civitas fidelissima* – 1925) was edited by Gusztáv Thirring, an expert at geography and demography. Thirring was born into a German-speaking family but was a Hungarian nationalist. He stressed that the result of the referendum was just a spontaneous manifestation of a historically evolved patriotic sentiment.<sup>4</sup> According to him, the German citizens of Sopron were always loyal to the Hungarian nation-state. Later, Thirring published several articles and books about the social and economic history of Sopron; while relying on the methods of social sciences, he maintained a Hungarian nationalist agenda throughout his works.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miltschinsky, Viktor: *Das Verbrechen von Ödenburg*. Auf Grund authentischen Materials dargestellt. Wien: Kommissionsverlag Literaria, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> Aull, Otto: O, Ödenburg! *Volkszeitung*, 30th of March, 1924. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Thirring, Gusztáv (ed.): *Sopron. Civitas fidelissima*. Sopron: Székely és Társa, 1925.

<sup>5</sup> Thirring, Gusztáv: *Sopron városa a 18. században. Népesedés- és gazdaságtörténeti tanulmány*. Sopron: Székely és Társa, 1939.

## Nationalizing border cities: Eisenstadt

The border city on the Austrian side, Eisenstadt, did not receive particular attention until 1925, when it became the provincial capital of Burgenland. In 1931, the regional authorities celebrated the 10th anniversary of Burgenland. It was part of the regional memory politics that Otto Aull published a comprehensive history of Eisenstadt. The book emphasized that all ethnic groups of the city (even the Jews and Hungarians) were integrated into the German culture and used the German language in their everyday communication.<sup>6</sup> In his historical overview, Aull condemned the expensive lifestyle and catholic orientation of Hungarian aristocrats (the family Esterházy) who lived in Eisenstadt. He rather sided with the supposedly democratic and protestant German folk of the city population. Hungarian historian and archivist Jenő Házi challenged Aull's point of view in a critical review, which was published in the leading Hungarian journal for history, the *Századok* (Centuries). Házi belittled the cultural relevance of the German-speaking population in Eisenstadt and focused instead on the deeds of the Hungarian family of Esterházy. In Házi's opinion, it were the members of the Esterházy family that made Eisenstadt a flourishing, European centre of culture – for example, by supporting and financing famous musicians like Joseph Haydn.<sup>7</sup>

It is striking how historical interpretations changed over time. After the annexation of Austria by the Nazi Germany (1938), the history of Eisenstadt was reframed in a radical way. Heinrich Kunnert published a small book about the city, which aimed to guide the readers throughout its history, art and environment. In this booklet, Kunnert called the Jewish inhabitants of Eisenstadt as members of a „parasite race” and argued for their deportation.<sup>8</sup> In the year Kunnert's book was published, Burgenland ceased to exist as a region in, since its territory was divided between Unterdonau and Styria.

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<sup>6</sup> Aull, Otto: Eisenstadt. Ein Führer durch seine Geschichte und Kunst. Eisenstadt, 1931. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Házi, Jenő: Aull Otto: Eisenstadt. Ein Führer durch seine Geschichte und Kunst. Eisenstadt, 1931. [Recension] *Századok* 66. 1932. 4–6. 232–233 (here: 233.)

<sup>8</sup> Kunnert, Heinrich – Bogati, Adolf: Eisenstadt. Festgabe zum Kreisparteitag der NSDAP. Brüder Herl, Eisenstadt, 1939. 10.

## The impact of the German Volksgeschichte on the study of Burgenland

In the 1930s some considerable shifts took place in the ranks of Austrian and Hungarian historical writing. The research on the history of Burgenland became much more organized and a new historical approach started to gain momentum.

The German Südostforschung viewed Burgenland as a vital bridgehead for future cultural and political expansion. The goal of these German Southeast studies was, on one hand, to collect all kinds of data on Germans living abroad and, on the other hand, to support research in connection with their history, anthropology, economy, and sociology. This complex knowledge was then utilised to support the territorial expansionism of Germany. The institute coordinating the related research (Südost Institut) was established in München, 1930. From 1936 on, the institute published an official journal called Südost-Forschungen, which became a new scientific and political forum for Austrian historians. For example, local historians living in Burgenland (Otto Aull, Heinrich Kunnert, Ernst Löger) now had a chance publish their articles there, aiming for a broader readership. Even in the first volume of the journal in 1936, we encounter several Burgenland-related articles. For example, Ernst Löger analyzed the history of education in Western Hungary/Burgenland in an extensive article and criticised the Hungarian assimilation policy of the 19th century.<sup>9</sup>

Besides Südostforschung, there existed a vast network of research groups in Germany that supported an ethnic (völkisch) view of history (Volksgeschichte). These research groups were called „Volksdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaften” and they had six different centres. One of them (Südostdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) was established in Vienna, 1931. The head of this Forschungsgemeinschaft was Hugo Hassinger, a professor of geography at the University of Vienna. Hassinger’s interest covered both historical and geographical topics. His group was very influential because it was supported financially by Germany and managed to connect Austrian historians living in Vienna and Burgenland. The Südostdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft had members in the State Archives of Vienna (Lothar Gross), in the Institute of Austrian Historical Research (Hans Hirsch, director of the institute), and the Regional Archive of Burgenland (Heinrich Kunnert). Those local historians in Burgenland who subscribed to the völkisch view of history had their scientific career secured and had more publishing opportunities. One of the joint scientific projects of these groups was the

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<sup>9</sup> Löger, Ernst: Zur Geschichte des burgenländischen Schulwesens. Südostdeutsche Forschungen 1 (1936):194–223.

Burgenlandatlas in 1941, which consisted of dozens of high-quality maps and lengthy commentary texts explaining the historical events depicted on the maps.<sup>10</sup>

At that time, the leading representatives of the Volksgeschichte – Ernst Klebel, Otto Brunner, Heinrich Kunnert – published articles and books about the history of the German population in Burgenland. The main elements of this approach can be illustrated with one study by Otto Brunner published in 1932. In *Das Burgenland*, Brunner emphasized that the region rightfully belongs to Austria but not because of a diplomatic treaty or as a political result of the war. Burgenland has always been an integral part of the German ethnic bloc; thus, the Hungarian rule was only a transitional period in its history.<sup>11</sup> According to Brunner, it is true that the regional elite was of Hungarian origin, but the majority of the population spoke German. Therefore it was the peasantry that preserved the German character of the territory.

## The adaptation of Volksgeschichte in Hungary

In contrast to many other Hungarian scholars debating the Austrian Burgenland-histories (like Jenő Házi or Gusztáv Thirring), a younger generation of Hungarian historians became open to the methods and ideas of the German Volksgeschichte, and they tried to use this scientific toolkit against Austrian and German historians while challenging their histories about population and urban history. An expert at population and county history, Elemér Mályusz propagated an ethnic concept of the nation, which meant that he considered the territory of Burgenland as a Hungarian Kultur- and Volksboden. Mályusz taught Hungarian history at the University of Budapest and had many followers.

One of his pupils, Márton Kovács researched the social- and ethnohistory of the Hungarian diaspora living in Burgenland, especially the minority groups around Felsőőr (Oberwart). His approach was similar to his Austrian colleagues: he concentrated much more on the peasantry because – according to Kovács – the lower ranks of society represented the authentic Hungarian culture. In opposition to this ordinary Volk, the Hungarian aristocrats like the family of Esterházy played a negative role in the Hungarian history of Burgenland, because they sympathized with the Habsburgs and they did not care about the ethnic background of the population under their rule (the landholders of the family Esterházy hired German, Slavic, Jewish and Hungarian workers alike). Kovács presented the ethnohistory of Felsőőr as a kind

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<sup>10</sup> Bodo, Fritz, Hassinger, Hugo (Hgs.): Burgenlandatlas. Wien: Österreichischer Verlag, Wien, 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Brunner, Otto: Das Burgenland. In: Bekenntnis zu Österreich. Ein Buch der Gemeinschaft. Edited by Friedrich, Heiss-Hillen A., Ziegfeld. 40–46. Berlin: Volk und Reich, 1932.

of infinite war between ethnic blocks. In his opinion, Austria has almost won this war, because the Germans in this region has received ethnic „reinforcements” much faster than the Hungarians since the 16th century.<sup>12</sup> Kovács’s book intended to be a wake-up call for the Hungarian authorities that they should do something to preserve the Hungarian diaspora outside state borders. The book of Kovács attracted attention of Austrian historians across the border. A historian from Graz, Bernhard Zimmermann reviewed the volume in *Südostforschungen*. He acknowledged some merits of Kovács (his critical handling of the sources, for example), but he belittled the cultural relevance of Hungarian communities living in Felsőőr. In Zimmermann’s opinion, they did not even publish a Hungarian newspaper, implying that their history is not that important even from a Hungarian perspective.<sup>13</sup>

### A multicultural border region as target of rival national histories

Historians played a huge role in stabilising the results of territorial changes. However, evoking the past could be utilized to question the historical legitimacy of these changes as well. While the Austrian and German historians emphasised a 1000-year-long German ethnic continuity in the history of Sopron or Eisenstadt, some Hungarian scholars held the ethnic component less important and relied on a political (territorial) concept of the nation. Hungarian historians did not acknowledge the legitimacy of a new region called Burgenland. They viewed it as a part of „Greater Hungary” (ie. the Hungarian state before the treaty of Trianon), or as a Hungarian Kulturboden. As we have seen, the historians held different opinions about nationality, but their common goal was to homogenize an otherwise multicultural border region via writing its history.

It can be also observed that the more professional a historian was, the easier it became for him to advance his career and participate in national historical debates – and vice versa. It was not rare that precisely those local historians of Burgenland could work together with Austrian and German historians in the long run, who were also frequent opponents of Hungarian authors – like Heinrich Kunnert, Otto Aull and Viktor Miltschinsky.

The referendum of 1921 in Sopron was at the centre of many national histories. It was the peak or the lowest point in the history of Sopron, depending on which side of the border an author wrote. For the Hungarian nationalists, this event made every history of Sopron a kind of theological fulfilment of a historical destiny. This interpretation (which is still flourishing in

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<sup>12</sup> Márton, Kovács: *A felsőőri magyar népsziget*. Budapest, 1942. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Zimmermann, Bernhard: Kovács Márton: *A felsőőri magyar népsziget*. [Recension]. *Südostforschungen* 9–10. (1944–1945): 441–442. (here: 442.)

present-day Hungary) silences the fact that not everyone acknowledged the legitimacy of this referendum. The Austrian side often tied political views to the ethnic background of the population, thus limiting the possibility of free thinking outside ethnic determinants. By highlighting the German ethnic character of Sopron (or Eisenstadt), they attempted to destabilise the right of Hungary to the city.

In my study I did not aim to achieve completeness, since the Burgenland-debate between historians was an extensive discourse in the interwar period. Rather I tried to show as many aspects of this debate as possible in a short overview. These historical antagonisms targeted cities, persons and the different concepts of nation. My argument is that border situations like this are excellent opportunities to study the interactions between identity and historical writings but also to gain knowledge about the mechanisms and logics of the historical profession.