

Amsterdam Studies

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth

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László Marác: The Western political stereotypes and images of the Hungarians: part I.

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The Western images and stereotypes of the Hungarians and the Hungarian self-images switch between two sets. The negative variant of Hungarians as inferior, backward, plundering Asiatic, barbarian intruders in Europe and the positive variant of Hungarians heroically fighting for the defence of Christian Europe and European liberal values. Throughout the particular stages of history the same kind of images or their variants reappear. The realization of these values is dependent on the political decisions and attitudes of the West in general, of a particular state; or of a particular political camp. Thus, if Hungarians act against the political interest of the West – or more precisely against the interest of a Western state or political camp involved – then the negative variant is triggered. On the other hand, if Hungarians defend Western interest – or more precisely those of a Western state or political camp involved – then the positive variant surfaces.

The seemingly uncoordinated military manoeuvres of the Hungarians deeply penetrating into Western Europe in 896 A.D. in order to get hold of their present-day Central-European homeland have been described by Western historiographers as ‘plundering raids’ by ‘barbarians’. The alleged link between the Hungarians and other tribes coming from the east like the Scythians, Huns and the Avars attacking the West centuries before the Hungarians established the image of Hungarians as barbarians even more directly. This image of plundering, barbarian Hungarians can be found in many Western, and even Hungarian, textbooks and encyclopaedia. The French *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Ancient and Medieval History* speaks of ‘Hungarian terror’. The memories of plundering, barbarian Hungarians supposedly eating raw meat and drinking the blood of their defeated enemies even serves to explain the etymology of the English and French word *ogre* ‘monster, men-eater frightening children in fairy tales’. English and French linguists explain the etymology of this word by relating it with *Hongre* the name of Hungarians in old-French.

One of the most important European ruler in the eleventh century – next to Pope Sylvester II and the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III – is the first Christian king of Hungary, St. Stephen (997-1038). The Catholic ruler plays an important role in the ‘making’ of Europe as the founder of the Hungarian state. Hungary contributes to the security and safety of Europe at the frontiers of the former Roman Empire against the invasion of nomadic tribes from the east. Further Hungary allows the extension of the Catholic Church to the south-eastern parts of Europe. St. Stephen supports the spiritual reforms of Cluny. Last but not least Hungary allows the reopening of important track of pilgrims. The road to Jerusalem is guaranteed. Hence, the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Sylvester II himself, supports the campaign depicting ‘Hungary as the living rampart and the shield of Christian Europe’.

In the period of the Ottoman Turkish occupation between the fifteenth and seventeenth century Germany showed a great interest in the ongoing war in Hungary. This was due to the fact that the Germans were quite close to the frontline in Hungary or even involved in the fighting against the Turks. Interestingly, different types of images and stereotypes of the Hungarians simultaneously appeared in the German texts and pamphlets of that time. One set of German images depicts Hungary as the ‘shield of Christianity’, recalling the metaphors of earlier mediaeval times. It is regretted that after the battle of Mohács (1526) Hungary has become the victim of the plundering and murdering Turks. The Hungarians are praised for their ‘heroism’, ‘bravery’, ‘fighting-spirit’ and ‘chivalry’. The hero of this camp is the Catholic Count Nicholas Zrinyi who is leading the Christian resistance against the Turks.

The other set of images depicts the Hungarians as ‘traitors’, ‘cowards’ and ‘unreliable and uncontrollable’ people that cooperate with the Turkish heathens in order to indulge their hate against the Germans. This image of the Hungarians bears upon the Protestants in Eastern Hungary and Transylvania who cooperated with the Turks and called for religious tolerance in order to restore independent Hungary. Especially, the personifications of these Hungarian national movements, the Transylvanian Princes János Szapolyai, István Bocskai, Gábor Bethlen and Imre Thököly, were demonized.

Negative Western images and stereotypes of Hungarians also appeared during the Baroque and Enlightenment periods after the Ottoman Turks had been driven out of Hungary in 1699. More than 170 years of Turkish occupation and Hungary’s function as a cordon sanitaire of the West against the Turkish attacks had turned the Hungarian Kingdom into a ruin. This also contributed to the fact that Hungary was unable to keep up with the technological advancements and the development of citizenry in the West. The negative images of the Hungarians involve in this period the ‘inferior Asiatic barbarians, rapacious, wandering, horse-riding people that have no place among the cultivated Germans and Romans in Europe’. ‘Hungarian backwardness’ is embodied by the Hungarian aristocracy and gentry that is caricatured as being ‘lazy’ and ‘arrogant’.

The Austrian Habsburgs and the German citizenry in Hungary propagated these negative images of the Hungarians. According to them, Hungarians are uncivilized people that have no culture and all their cultural merits originate from the Germans. These negative Habsburg/German images are mainly due to political reasons. After the defeat of the Turks in Central Europe a power vacuum arises in that area. The Vienna Court sees the possibility of expanding the Habsburg Empire eastward, filling the vacuum left by the Turks. The only force that can hinder the Habsburgs in their aspiration to secure the Hungarian throne is the Hungarian aristocracy, the traditional bearer of the Hungarian national identity. Hence, the cultivation of caricatures of the Hungarian aristocracy.