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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 II.

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In the period of Romanticism a Western, exotic image of 'freedom-loving Hungary' surfaces accompanied by a related linguistic vocabulary, including the following expressions *csikósok* 'horseherds', *betyárok* 'outlaws', *huszárok* 'hussars', *cigányok* 'gypsies', *puszta* 'Hungarian steppe', *mulatság* 'amusement', *csárda* 'inn on the puszta', and so on. German writers, like Lenau and Schiller, and composers, like Franz List, played an important role in the transmission of these exotic images of the Hungarians to the West. The romantic image of 'freedom-loving Hungary' also had a political counterpart, namely, 'liberal Hungary' resisting the centralism of Vienna. The National Renewal initiated in the beginning of the nineteenth century by Count István Széchenyi caused this positive image. The positive image of liberal Hungary was especially popular among Western liberals who saw the Hungarians as champions of liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe. The leader of the 1848/1849 Revolution and War of Independence, Lajos Kossuth, and his close collaborators who went into exile after the defeat of the Hungarians by the Austrian and Russian armies at Világos were celebrated as real heroes in the West, especially in Great Britain and the United States.

Because of the compromise with Austria - the so-called *Ausgleich* of 1867 - Hungary became a member of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. The Dual Monarchy sided with Germany in the struggle for European power in the second half of the nineteenth century. Another consequence of the *Ausgleich* was that conservative, semi-feudal structures within the Austro-Hungarian Empire were preserved and hampered the equal treatment of the different nationalities in the Empire. In that period the Western, in particular British and French, positive images of 'liberal and constitutional Hungary' were replaced by 'Hungarians as brutal oppressors of Hungary's nationalities' and 'Hungarians threatening European peace' and 'being an obstacle for European progress' on account of Austria-Hungary's alliance with Germany. These negative images and stereotypes had a decisive impact on the Treaty of Trianon (1920). They served as the prime justification for the partitioning of historic Hungary. The traditional negative Western images and stereotypes of Hungarians as inferior, backward, aggressive Asiatic oppressors reoccur in the years preceding the First World War and remain vivid during and after the Great War. In this period, new variants, like the Hungarians as 'chauvinists', 'Magyarizers' and 'accomplices of the Germans' are added to the already existing ones.

The following two factors are responsible for the negative Western images and stereotypes in the interwar period. First, the Western perception of Hungarians as inferior conservatives who live in a kind of political dream world remains unaffected. The features of Hungarian political conservatism including *díszmagyar*, the gala-dress of the Hungarian aristocracy; oligarchic oppression of peasants; absence of universal suffrage; the ancient Hungarian Constitution; respect for the Holy Crown and attachment to the institutions of the Monarchy are regarded in Europe as something unique and exotic but also as something backward. Secondly, the Western Powers consider the Hungarian struggle for the revision of the Treaty of Trianon as a disturbing phenomenon in the European balance of power and peace. During the Second World War Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany, although Hungary was not willing to obey all the orders of the Nazis. After the War, however, the Western stereotype of the Hungarians as accomplices of German hegemony in Europe prevails again. During the Soviet-communist occupation of Hungary the positive Western images of Hungarians reappear. The Hungarian uprising of 1956 reinforced the image of Hungarians as brave, heroic defenders of European values and liberty against oppressive barbarism from the East. So did the Velvet Revolution of 1989 when the communist regime collapsed in Hungary as well.

In sum, in the twentieth century the Western stereotypes and images of the Hungarians have been predominantly negative. The Hungarian stereotype dwells on conservative, undemocratic traditions, nationalism and anti-Semitism, the Hungarian national character of melancholia, Hungarians as a source of trouble in Central Europe, and the Hungarians as Germanophiles.