

150 YEARS OF THE HUNGARIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

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The Hungarian Geographical Society was established on 12th January 1872, in the central headquarter of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. Due to international and domestic political reasons there have been several turning points in the last 150 years' history of the Hungarian Geographical Society. The main aim of this review is to summarise shortly the main epochs and their most important characteristics.

The foundation of the society was an important step toward the institutionalisation of geography as a modern discipline in Hungary. In the background both political and international academic factors played a role. On the political side, the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 (“Ausgleich” or “Kiegyezés”) was an important prerequisite. The Compromise partially re-established the sovereignty of Hungary, being separate from, but no longer subject to, the Austrian Empire. Under the Compromise foreign affairs, defence and finances were governed by “common” ministries of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, in all the other fields – including education and science – the independence of Hungary was completely restored. Due to the independent national higher-educational policy, the first Geography Department was established in the country at the Budapest University (today called Eötvös Loránd University) in 1870. The first appointed professor of the department was János HUNFALVY, born as Johann HUNSDORFER in a Zipser German family in Nagyszalók (*Groß Schlagendorf*), today Veľký Slavkov in Slovakia near Poprad. HUNFALVY adopted the scientific principles of Alexander von HUMBOLDT but he was also very much influenced by the comparative approaches of Karl RITTER (cf. KÁDÁR 1971).

In the early 19th century when geography became recognised as a discrete academic discipline several Geography Departments were established at major universities around Europe, the oldest in Paris at the Sorbonne (1804), followed by Berlin (1825) and later in Vienna (1851). The institutionalisation of modern geography also meant that next to university departments geographical societies were established to promote the advancement of the discipline, first in Paris the “Société de Géographie” (1821), followed by the “Gesellschaft für Erdkunde” in Berlin (1828) and the “Royal Geographical Society” in London (1830). In the subsequent decades similar societies started to operate in many European countries and cities (e.g., in Vienna in 1856), and also gradually outside Europe (e.g., in Mexico in 1839, or in New York in 1852).

Geography as a discipline became fashionable in the age of discoveries and travelling. These discoveries resulted in the publication of world atlases and comprehensive textbooks. The first modern world atlas reflecting the actual political situation was published by the Flemish geographer and cartographer ORTELIUS in 1570. To commemorate the 300th anniversary of the great work of ORTELIUS the first international geographical congress was convened in Antwerp in 1870, which had to be postponed due to the Franco-Prussian War. The congress was finally held

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between 14th and 22nd August 1871, and it was attended by two Hungarian delegates, János HUNFALVY and Ágoston TÓTH, a military cartographer (PAPP-VÁRY 2022).

Upon return HUNFALVY invited a couple of geographers and representatives of affiliated disciplines for an inaugural meeting of the Hungarian Geographical Society in the building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for the 12th of January 1872. Looking at the circumstances of its inception, international examples and the system of dualism within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy made the establishment of the Hungarian counterpart of the then 16 years old “Geographical Society of Vienna” nearly imperative. On the eve of its foundation, the society had already 250 members which shows the popularity of geography and geographical knowledge at that time and especially within the newly emerging Hungarian national academia.

The *first main period* in the history of the society can be identified between its foundation and World War I. This epoch – at least the first two decades – could be characterised by the dominance of public lectures and reports made by Hungarian explorers and travellers some of them being non-professional geographers, but members of aristocratic families (e.g., Béla SZÉCHENYI, Samu TELEKI or Jenő ZICHY) or representatives of related disciplines like the linguist Ármin VÁMBÉRY or the zoologist cartographer János XANTUS, the first director of the Budapest Zoo. From 1873 onwards the journal of the society called “Földrajzi Közlemények” (*Geographical Review*) was published regularly on a quarterly basis, although as KÁDÁR (1971) notes the first volumes were very much dominated by ethnographic type of studies.

After HUNFALVY'S death in 1888 Lajos LÓCZY, who graduated from ETH (*Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule*) in Zurich as a geologist, became professor of geography at Budapest University and president of the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1890. LÓCZY brought a distinct change in Hungarian geography making it a useful science, and in the life of the Hungarian Geographical Society making it a functioning network of professionals and geography lovers.

It was also his merit, that the attention of geographers turned towards the investigation of the home country and the academic training of a new generation of geographers. The approach of RITTER was replaced by RICHTHOFEN'S concepts, and a new field, geomorphology, emerged and became dominant in Hungary within the discipline for the next two or three generations. LÓCZY created the framework for the study of Lake Balaton with setting up the “Balaton Committee” within the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1891. The united efforts of distinguished geographers, geologists and earth scientists yielded 32 volumes of the Balaton monograph in the subsequent two decades. A few years before World War I a similar committee was set up by LÓCZY for the study of the geographical problems of the eastern part of the country – the Great Plain and Transylvania.

Next to his role in modernising academic research Lajos LÓCZY had great merit in training geographers as well. Generations of geographers grew up at the Budapest University under his supervision and some of them became professors of newly established geography departments and prominent leaders of the Hungarian Geographical Society. Among the new professors were Jenő CHOLNOKY in Kolozsvár (Cluj), Rezső MILLEKER in Debrecen, Gyula PRINZ in Pozsony (Bratislava) or Pál TELEKI at the Economic Faculty of Budapest, established after the war. Their role in the development of the Hungarian Geographical Society was also decisive. CHOLNOKY was secretary general between 1905 and 1910 followed by TELEKI between 1911 and 1923 (being also the prime minister of the country between 1920 and 1921). In 1914 CHOLNOKY replaced LÓCZY as president of the society and remained in this position until 1945.

The growing interest towards geography and the increasing number of university departments and students resulted in an upswing in societal life. This was well reflected by the growing number of members which reached 1600 on the eve of the outbreak of World War I, as well as the estab-

lishment of new sections within the society (e.g., economic geography) and the organisation of annual meetings at different locations, followed usually by excursions.

The *second main epoch* in the history of the Hungarian Geographical Society falls to the inter-war period. After World War I, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was accompanied by the partition of the historical territory of Hungary with the Treaty of Trianon (Versailles, 1920). As a consequence, Hungary lost 71.4 percent of its territory and 33 percent of its ethnic Hungarian population. Hungarians were shocked by these territorial and population losses, and geographers and the Hungarian Geographical Society took the lead in questioning the rationality of border changes and justifying the revisionist politics of the inter-war regimes. Prominent geographers of the inter-war period like Pál TELEKI, Jenő CHOLNOKY, Ferenc FODOR (former student of LÓCZY and close associate of TELEKI) and many others produced a vast number of articles, monographs, maps and atlases in different languages under the aegis of the Hungarian Geographical Society to justify the territorial claims of Hungary.

Thanks to this publicity geography gained high reputation in public eyes and education policy. Secondary school reforms initiated in 1924 significantly increased the number of classes in geography, and, so-called “homeland studies” covering the territory of Greater-Hungary were included in the new elementary school curriculum in 1925. The development of geography became very much interwoven with national politics. TELEKI himself was minister twice (responsible first for Religion and Education, and second for Foreign Affairs) and also prime minister twice, second time in 1938 until his suicide on 3rd April 1941. The peaceful territorial expansion of the country by the first and second Vienna Award in 1938 and 1940, and further gains in 1939 and 1941 through military interventions were considered as a great national success and obviously as a success of geography.

The *third major epoch* in the history of the Hungarian Geographical Society can be associated with the post-World War II period of the country terminated by the 1989–1990 systemic changes. Liberation from Nazi occupation meant automatically colonisation by Russian tanks (GYORI and GYURIS 2012). Together with other East Central European countries Hungary became part of the Soviet sphere of influence. The Sovietisation of the country meant the Sovietisation of science, including geography, which meant that Marxist-Leninist ideology became mandatory in research practice.

After the communist takeover in 1948 geography and geographers were considered guilty for their role played in territorial revisionism during the inter-war period, and geography was seen as a nationalist (fascist) discipline. In fact, very few Hungarian geographers had sympathised with fascism and none of them had participated in the fascist regime, nevertheless the Hungarian Geographical Society was dissolved in 1949 and its academic journal “Földrajzi Közlemények” (*Geographical Review*) was banned. In 1950 all four geographer members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Béla BULLA, Jenő CHOLNOKY, Tibor MENDÖL, Gyula PRINZ) were relegated to the status of “consultative member” which was equal to being expelled. The Hungarian Geographical Society could be re-established in 1952 with the leadership of the physical geographer Béla BULLA, who alone became rehabilitated as member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and was appointed as director of the newly-established Geographical Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The 1950s and 1960s were characterised by the unequal fight between “old” (bourgeois) and “new” (Marxist-Leninist) geographers, the former being gradually expelled from positions at universities, research institutes and planning authorities (GYORI and GYURIS 2012). The leading ideologist of the “new” geographers was György MARKOS who returned from exile after World

War II, became vice-president of the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1952 and also the head of TELEKI's department at the University of Economics, now named after Karl MARX. The Marxist-Leninist invasion of Hungarian geography culminated in the return of Sándor RADÓ from the Soviet Union in 1955, who, being an agent of Soviet intelligence before and during World War II while living in Switzerland, was sent to the Gulag by Stalin for ten years after the war. He followed MARKOS as the head of TELEKI's department between 1958 and 1966, and became president of the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1973.

During the communist system geography as school subject became marginalised, the number of geography classes in primary and secondary education decreased, at the university level geography could only be studied as part of teachers' training programmes. Within the Geographical Society new territorial branches and thematic sections were created in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Hungarian Geographical Museum was established in Érd near Budapest by Dénes BALÁZS in 1983.

The systemic changes of 1989–1990, the collapse of the communist system and the democratic transition of the country launched the *fourth main period* in the history of the Hungarian Geographical Society. The profound changes in the political and socio-economic system of the country have resulted again in the re-positioning of geography and the Hungarian Geographical Society. In line with the democratisation of the country the society was converted to a not-for-profit organisation (NGO) functioning according to the law. Simultaneously, its activity was widened, next to public lectures, exhibitions and excursions, conferences and other public events were regularly organised in order to make geography and its relevance more perceptible to the wider public.

New geography and environment related programmes in higher education made the discipline again very popular among young people which was reflected by skyrocketing numbers of geography students at universities. In the late 1990s and early 2000s professional geographers and geography teachers were already trained at nine Hungarian higher education institutions.

However, the hey-day of geography teaching in higher education was not accompanied by an expansion of membership in the Hungarian Geographical Society. In the age of globalisation and under the circumstances of growing competition on the labour market only a small percentage of university students was interested to become member of the Hungarian Geographical Society. Many of them put the question: "Why should I be member of the Geographical Society?" This is not a unique Hungarian phenomenon, and it has also been reported by other geographical societies in Europe (see e.g., DROOGLEEVER FORTUIJN et al. 2020).

The main challenges for the Hungarian Geographical Society on the eve of its 150th anniversary are how to increase the recognition of geography, how to increase the visibility and relevance of the discipline when it comes to global issues (e.g., climate change, natural hazards, geopolitical conflicts), how to attract new members and how to mobilise young people through its activities and programmes.

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