
The book under review is part of a series on the history of the Hungarian Diets and National Assemblies which is published by the Office of the Hungarian National Assembly. The aim of the series was to create an introduction to the history of Hungarian diets until 2014 authored by respected researchers. István M. Szijártó (associate professor at Eötvös Loránd University, Department of Economic and Social History) is the author of the second volume in the series, which focuses on the history of Hungarian diets between 1708 and 1792. The book is based on two previous works by Szijártó, which offer a more thorough treatment of the topic (A diéta: A magyar rendek és az országgyűlés 1708–1712 [2015] and A politikai elit társadalom- és kultúrtörténeti megközelítésben: Emberek és struktúrák a 18. századi Magyarországon [2017]). In recent decades, numerous books have been written about the diets from various approaches, such as social and cultural history. Historians have analyzed the diets, the political debates and decisions, and the roles of different political groups like the clergy and the nobility. In the book under review, Szijártó comprehensively examines the changes and developments of the diet as an institution, as well as the political power of county representatives and other participants. He thus sheds light on the ways in which this institution functioned in the eighteenth century, while also outlining its workings in the nineteenth.

The book consists of four parts. The first part presents the workings of the Hungarian diets, the second focuses on debates and conflicts, and the last two analyze observable changes in the diet and contextualize parliamentary phenomena.

This suppletory monograph opens with a detailed description of the diets’ workings from convocation to closure. The reader learns about the members of the Upper and the Lower House and their functions and the relationship between the king and the estates. The book also offers sketches of the political groups within the houses. This overview includes negotiations and agreements, the work of commissions, the drafting of articles, the question of precedence, the presence of adolescents in the diets, the sites and duration of assemblies, and the Latin terms used in the documents. Szijártó analyzes political languages, and he also discusses how the different sources (contemporary diaries and official documents) came into being. The first section sums up the workings of the
Hungarian Diet in the eighteenth century, which though shaped by custom, was at the same time complex and shifting.

The second part of the book is about debates and conflicts in the assemblies, and the Szijártó divides the period under examination into two parts based on the themes of the debates. In the first period, negotiations were dominated by confessional debates. Calling into question the persuasiveness of earlier hypotheses found in the secondary literature, Szijártó points out that the king and the Catholic estates were not always in opposition to Protestants, and sometimes Protestants applied successfully to the king for support in different conflicts. From 1728 onwards, the estates were not allowed to discuss confessional matters, so deputies belonging to different religions were able to cooperate with one another when defending their nobiliary privileges.

There were also heavy debates concerning taxation. The Hungarian diet had had the right to vote about raising taxes, but it could not assert this right from the second half of the seventeenth century until the beginning of eighteenth, i.e. the end of the rebellion led by Francis II Rákóczi. In connection with the rate of the war tax, Szijártó analyzes the king’s income from Hungary and the costs of maintaining his army stationed in the kingdom. He points out that war taxes on which votes were held in the diet represented only a small fraction of the king’s income, and the army’s maintenance costs were several times that sum. The government repeatedly wanted to impose a tax upon the nobility, but the noblemen successfully defended their exemption from taxation.

The disputants in the diets could be divided into two sections, the government party and the opposition, but an individual’s membership in one of these two groups was neither unambiguous nor continuous. In general, the members of the Upper House were in the government party, and the members of the opposition sat in the Lower House. Szijártó emphasizes that the chairman of the Lower House was appointed by the king, so this chairman tried to influence the estates to support royal interests. To achieve this aim, he had many means, but this did not always guarantee success. The clergy and the deputies of royal free boroughs supported the king, while the county representatives and deputies of absent magnates tended to defend the interests of the estates.

The third part of the work examines changes in the diet from the perspectives of social, cultural, and institutional history. The first chapter of this section starts with analyses of the careers of important political figures. Szijártó adopts an innovative method by examining different motivating factors behind both parties’ political practices. He identifies thirteen kinds of career,
depending on religion, county, being an office-holder or not, and the success of the career. Szijártó offers thirteen examples of the professional lives of deputies as illustrations of these careers. He refutes the widespread view according to which the leaders of the opposition were Protestants and, in the eighteenth century, came from the counties through which the Tisza River passed. With regard to political practices (including taxation), Szijártó makes it clear through statistical analysis that the attitudes of the members of the opposition and the government party cannot be simplified according to religion, because Protestant deputies occasionally supported the ruler’s standpoints, while many members of the opposition were Catholic. Szijártó arrives at the conclusion that in the first half of the eighteenth century important politicians were still able to express an oppositional opinion in one matter while voicing a loyal one in another. This situation, however, changed in the second half of the century.

Szijártó analyzes political debates which were held in the diets at the end of the eighteenth century from the perspective of cultural history. His inquiry concerning confessional debates in 1790–1791 reveals that disputants used argumentation looking back at the past as well as towards the future. Thus, Szijártó challenges the view according to which the estates embodied “backwardness” in the diets. The research drawing on ceremonial speeches is important as an introduction to the political languages in use in these contexts. However, only a few speeches have survived in full, and so they offer only fragments of information, while the speech summaries which survived in diaries present the views of contemporaries concerning the speeches.

The realignment of the estates is observable in the decision-making process at the diets. The advocatory deputies made suggestions concerning emerging problems. There were several ways of reaching agreement, and there were no precise regulations, and this resulted in changes in the balance of political power.

Szijártó’s significant analysis of the instructions given by the county assembly is the subject of the fourth part of the work. He points out that while these instructions were general and short at the beginning of the eighteenth century, they became detailed and long by the end of the century. Furthermore, by that time, even lesser noblemen had started to take an interest in national politics, and they elaborated their own political programs.

The book includes several illustrations, and the maps show where county deputies from the opposition came from in the eighteenth century. The references are listed at the end of each section as endnotes, and additional
information about the examined topic can be read at the bottom of the page, so the text is easy to follow. At the end of the book, the literature and list of sources are presented according to the four main parts of the book. The monograph ends with an index. The book’s sectioning is clear, and the topics are logically built and full of relevant information. The reader can follow Szijártó’s analyses, because he gives several examples to support each of his statements.

This work is the fruit of several decades of research by Szijártó. It is based on a wide range of sources and thorough methodological knowledge that is in line with European trends. Szijártó relies on the methodological works of several foreign scholars, and thus he has studied the history of the Hungarian diets from several viewpoints, and he has provided a great deal of valuable information. Scholars, students, and any one curious about the political history of the region will find this monograph of great use. They will also find it a pleasure to read.

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