

Az arisztokrácia tündöklése és bukása Magyarországon, 1700–1957

[The rise and fall of the aristocracy in Hungary, 1700–1957].

By Gábor Gyáni and Adrienn Szilágyi. Budapest: HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History, 2024. 624 pp.

One of the most popular, if not the most popular, libraries in Hungary today is the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library. Its imposing interiors provide an inspiring milieu for the concentrated and intellectually elevated processes of study and cultivation. The ballroom and the hunting room are almost always filled with students, researchers, and, naturally, tourists. The library was formerly the palace of the aristocratic Wenckheim family, while its namesake is one of the institution's librarians, the radically left-wing Ervin Szabó. This tension presumably occupies only a fraction of the visitors, yet the attraction of partially immersing oneself in the aristocratic high society of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy appears not to have diminished. Beyond the interest of the professional scholarly community, it is likely that this receptivity also explains why the book by Gábor Gyáni and Adrienn Szilágyi was republished in 2025 following its initial appearance in 2024. The volume constitutes a work of social history that stands out among the impressive publications recently issued by the Institute of History of the ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities. The book is remarkably vivid, a quality derived not only from its rich visual material of approximately 350 illustrations, but also from the recorded utterances, emotions, thoughts, and decisions of the former aristocratic actors, all of which render the narrative lively and accessible. The subject matter strongly requires this degree of readability, since it is grounded in highly rigorous and austere theoretical foundations. The volume presupposes a certain familiarity with social history, including knowledge of Max Weber's concepts of class, status, and power, Maurice Halbwachs's work on collective memory, and Jürgen Habermas's reflections on the public sphere. Its monumental character is also conveyed by its physical form: the 624-page volume, within whose pages approximately 1,200 individuals are brought to life, is imposing even in its sheer weight.

One immediate precursor to the volume is the chapter on aristocrats in the social history textbook coauthored by Hungarian historians Gábor Gyáni and György Kövér, as well as the monograph developed from the dissertation research of Adrienn Szilágyi, senior research fellow at the Institute of History, which presents the fate of the noble society of Békés County. Building on these works, together with the findings from the past fifteen years of scholarship

on aristocracy, the authors are nevertheless careful to emphasize from time to time those lacunae that Hungarian research has yet to address, such as, the reconstruction of demographic behavior despite the otherwise rich availability of source material. The volume, which opens with a European comparative perspective, proceeds step by step toward its principal subject. In this manner, the fundamental parameters distinguishing the aristocracy are delineated: lineage, landownership, privileges, and the nature of aristocratic cultivation and education. The separation of aristocracies, a phenomenon observable across Europe, as well as their internal diversity, which shifted over time within Europe itself, depended as much on the degree of porosity characterizing their social class and estate as on their inheritance practices, their participation in agricultural modernization, and the extent of their involvement in local and national political life. Through English, French, Italian, German, Russian, and finally, and deliberately in the greatest detail, Austrian examples, the authors unfold the multifaceted nature of European aristocracy. Yet their fate is presented everywhere as fundamentally identical: “owing to diverse historical circumstances and causes, the destruction of the aristocracy as an economic resource, social formation, and political factor occurred everywhere” (p.77).

In the chapter “The Aristocracy as a Historical-Legal Estate,” emphasis is placed on titles and forms of designation, coats of arms, the historical formation of the aristocracy, its numerical dimensions, and the naturalization of foreigners, that is, on the qualitative and quantitative parameters constituting aristocratic existence. Within the internal stratification of the aristocracy, which outwardly projected a certain sense of unity, the question of court eligibility occupied a particularly prominent position. This issue proved decisive from the perspective of one of the volume’s central threads running throughout the work: the aristocracy’s relationship to the monarch. The duality between striving for proximity to the ruler and openly or covertly positioning oneself in opposition to him emerges repeatedly as a recurring problem, particularly over the course of the nineteenth century.

Building on these antecedents, the chapter “The Aristocracy as a Ruling Elite” explores the landed relations of the high nobility, beginning essentially with the liberation of the territories formerly occupied by the Ottoman Empire, and more particularly with the consolidation of landed property relations that emerged from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Here, Adrienn Szilágyi is able to draw confidently on her research in Békés County, as well as on the rich archival material of the Károlyi family. At the same time, the chapter

also integrates earlier pioneering investigations by outstanding Hungarian historians into estates, production statistics, and inequalities of wealth and income. In examining and evaluating the existence, role, and possibilities of entails and lease-holding arrangements, the authors conclude that the large estate system successfully adapted itself to the capitalist economic order even after the dismantling of the estate-based social framework. This is sufficiently demonstrated, in the case of numerous estates, by their highly active participation in the grain trade during periods both of economic expansion and contraction. It is here that the authors explicitly declare their commitment to the principle of multiple modernities, a position they reiterate in the concluding section as well. The subsection closing the chapter, which investigates the question of debt and credit circulation, presents the system of lending within the family, specifically within the Harruckern family. The authors argue convincingly that this system functioned not as a form of familial assistance, but rather as the most advantageous form of borrowing, maintaining its exclusivity until the final third of the nineteenth century.

After offering an outline of the theoretical framework of interpretation, the chapter “The Aristocracy as a Power Elite” presents the replacement of the domestic political elite during the reigns of the Habsburg enlightened absolutist rulers. It then proceeds systematically through the court dignitaries of the examined period, demonstrating that these positions were not merely reserved for members of the narrowest elite, but that throughout the nineteenth century the captaincy of the Royal Noble Bodyguard was held exclusively by members of the Esterházy and Pálffy families (p.207). It is likewise here that we become acquainted with the court offices and with the possible, though by no means typical, mobility between positions exemplified by Károly József Batthyány, who served as Ban of Croatia, later became Lord Steward, and ultimately rose to ministerial rank and was granted a princely title. In the intensive political life of the Reform Era, the high aristocracy was compelled, on the one hand, to reckon with the strengthening lesser nobility, while, on the other, those who could at all afford participation in the diets also had to clarify their stance toward the monarch. Thus emerged the circle of opposition magnates associated with the names of István Széchenyi, Miklós Wesselényi, and Lajos Batthyány, while figures such as György Apponyi, Antal Szécsen, and Samu Jósika appeared in opposition to them. According to one of the most compelling conclusions of the chapter, opposition politics presupposed material independence, whereas “families of more modest means often became supporters of the government

[...]” (p.223). One of the central issues of the period following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, and one that has been more thoroughly illuminated by recent scholarship, concerns the impact of the 1885 reform of the House of Magnates, which on the one hand brought about the loss of elite positions for many, while on the other encouraged numerous individuals to compete for seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Furthermore, commensurate with the ambitions of a synthesis, the chapter discusses exhaustively the political engagement of the aristocracy, their ideological and political orientations, the challenges of diplomatic and military careers, together with the gradual loss of the exclusivity of these professions, and finally the effects of World War I and the Treaty of Trianon, after which their position was significantly weakened.

The chapter titled “The Aristocracy as an Order of Social Conduct” examines the lifestyle, mentality, value system, and identity of the high aristocracy as rooted in the estate-based order. It explores the distinctive characteristics ingrained through upbringing and familial socialization when discussing questions of education, mother tongue, schooling, and place of residence, that is, through its survey of castles, palaces, and aristocratic residences. We are presented with a nuanced picture of the fundamental influence of nurses and tutors, the emotional depth of father–son relationships, and even their conflicts, as may be observed through the relationship between István Széchenyi and his son Béla. A recurrent theme of the chapter is the nature of contact with those outside aristocratic circles, not only in relation to tutors, but also with regard to attendance at public schools. Nor does the chapter avoid the question of the mother tongue acquired by aristocrats, since “the cognitive and emotional foundation of modern national consciousness is national identity, which [...] is tied by the closest bonds precisely to language and culture” (p.302), while at the same time mastery of several languages at the highest level constituted a fundamental expectation placed on them. The extensive discussion within the chapter devoted to castles and palaces is justified by the fact that these provided the essential conditions for aristocratic estate-based existence: they “signified rank, ensured isolation, and at the same time conveyed the self-representation of the owning family” (p.315). Within this framework, attention is also given to the personnel, including domestic servants, as well as to guests, among them even the monarch himself, while maps enable the reader to locate the surviving and demolished aristocratic palaces of present-day Vienna, Bratislava, and Budapest.

The following chapter, “The Aristocracy as Clan and Exclusive Society,” first examines the nature of private life and subsequently that of social life,

accompanied throughout by rich illustrations. The pages bring to life memories of marriages, loves, and mistresses; and while, during the examined period, marriage outside the aristocratic circle constituted a decisive source of conflict that could be resolved only in exceptional cases, wealth was simultaneously divided and diminished from generation to generation. Alongside the presentation of the settings of social life, such as balls and casinos, the chapter also addresses competitions and sports intended to demonstrate individual excellence, mentioning as a significant consequence the internationally recognized success of Hungarian horse breeding. Hunting, too, possessed its own distinctive language, culture, and ritual, yet in both importance and ceremonial character weddings and funerals rose far above these activities. News of these occasions and their solemnity at times became nationally known through the press, while the family burial sites and mausoleums, some of them executed with artistic refinement, can still be seen today.

The chapter “Diverse Aristocratic Identities and Social Roles” presents, on the one hand, the practice of patronage and, on the other, identities existing beyond aristocratic status itself, including academic, scholarly, and artistic activities. György Festetics, who promoted agricultural education in Hungary, and Ferenc Széchenyi, founder of the national museum and library, together with the former’s nephew and the latter’s son, István Széchenyi, founder of the predecessor institution of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, are well-known names in Hungary. At the same time, the authors also discuss in greater detail the significant donations of the Teleki family and, at the end of the chapter, among others, present those female patrons whose work aimed at the development of schools and the extension of social welfare. Among aristocrats, moreover, one finds examples both of professional scholars and of writers and painters who produced works of enduring aesthetic value. The authors nevertheless emphasize that such figures should be regarded merely as exceptions, a circumstance presumably influenced as well by the fact that existential security did not compel amateur creators to take into consideration the market conditions that might otherwise have stimulated their development.

The final chapter of the volume before the conclusion, entitled “The Image and Tribulations of the Aristocracy,” is constructed on two pillars that stand in a compelling relationship with one another. The authors first examine the question of aristocratic image, partly through contemporary literary works and partly through diary excerpts of the individuals concerned, which are not infrequently self-critical and critical of their own class. Mihály Károlyi, of socialist

sympathies and often referred to as the “Red Count,” perceived the essence of the aristocratic ethos in social insensitivity, indifference toward society, and emotional coldness, while several others, both inside and outside aristocratic circles, likewise mention the “alienation from reality” (p.520) resulting from their social isolation. At the same time, an entire series of contradictory, positive examples may also be identified. It is evident, however, that the issue cannot be resolved through examples alone, particularly since no metric exists by which it might be measured. The second pillar of the chapter, inseparable from the former, concerns the succession of tribulations endured by the aristocracy which, after a few earlier antecedents affecting only a limited number of individuals, first shattered the economic dominance of the aristocracy during the twentieth century and, following World War II, came to threaten their very existence. They lost their remaining estates, homes, and titles; several met violent deaths, while those who had not already left the country faced prosecution, internment, or deportation.

The volume presents the history of the Hungarian aristocracy, and particularly its social history, from both a theoretical perspective and a highly practical perspective. It will undoubtedly be regularly used in institutions of higher education, but even more importantly, it provides a framework for further research: through meticulous scholarship, the authors have surveyed the achievements of previous research and, precisely by doing so, have demonstrated how many new questions and problems still await investigation if we are to gain a fuller understanding of those who, although they lived in an exceptionally exclusive manner, nevertheless exerted an outstanding influence on the course of Hungarian history.

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