An Environmental History of Knowledge and Politics: Forestry in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Hungary. By Róbert Balogh with contributions from Péter Homor. Budapest: CEU Press, 2026. 182 pp.

Róbert Balogh's *An Environmental History of Knowledge and Politics* comes at a time of new interest in environmental themes in East Central Europe, a region the scholars of which have been among the last to adopt environmental history as a relevant academic pursuit. This is true in part because environmental historians, who have gotten used to writing environmental histories either of what we commonly call "the West" or of (post)colonial spaces, do not quite know where to place Eastern Europe in this dualistic worldview. Historians of the region, for their part, have preferred their more traditional pastimes, such as the study of nationalism, capitalism, and nation-state formation.

The unfortunate loss, as Balogh demonstrates, is that countries and regions such as Hungary and East Central Europe are perfectly positioned both to integrate the environment into these traditional foci of area studies and to complicate the still dominant dualistic view of the world arising from world systems theory, with these two spaces (the "West" and the "(post)colonial") as definitive of the global experience.

This book serves as both an introduction to the region for the environmental historian as well as an introduction to the relevance of the environment and environmental sciences as valuable lenses of analysis through which to study regional developments and the region's global connections. Balogh's work joins the new wave of environmental scholarship that is emerging in the region, though this book sets itself apart in two important ways: it is among the most accessible books for those unfamiliar with environmental scholarship and it is focused on modern forestry, which is a rare subject of study in the limited specialist environmental scholarship of the region. Balogh begins with a much-needed primer of canon works in environmental history for the benefit of area studies scholars less familiar with the field. With the exception of the first chapter and the one titled "Conclusions," the book is organized into chronological chapters, with each chapter based on traditional periodization, each following various themes, and each offering associated case studies relevant to that specific moment.

The first chapter focuses on the concept of the Anthropocene and the various ways in which forestry has contributed to it, with discussion of the main scholarly debates around the concept. Importantly, Balogh adds insights gleaned from his unique scholarly background, foregrounding paradigm-shifting

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works from Western environmental historical scholarship (Cronon, Hughes, McNeill, Osterhammel, Radkau, Warde) and some major works from the South Asian postcolonial tradition, such as K. Sivaramakrishnan's *Modern Forests* and Neeladri Bhattacharya's *The Great Agrarian Conquest*. Scholars of East Central and Southeastern Europe should find this integrative review refreshing. The chapter is an especially excellent primer for scholars and students unfamiliar with environmental history.

The second chapter studies the processes of commodification in the Kingdom of Hungary in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. It focuses primarily on the legal changes affecting property rights and the steady move toward the banishment of traditional local economic activities from forests, reflected through the Forest Laws of 1852 and 1879 (pp.38–39). The chapter also points to the ways in which these processes turned modern forestry agents into mediators between the state and communities and individuals. The emergence of management plans served not only to expand central state authority, but also to capitalize and globalize spaces that predominantly had been local.

The third chapter turns to the late Kingdom of Hungary and studies the institutionalization of Hungarian forestry via the familiar lens of nationalism and nation-building. The intentional effort to dislodge German and replace it with Hungarian as the language of instruction and social life constituted a double effort: to magyarize the Forestry Academy and to transform the forestry profession into a nationalizing political community and institution. Balogh identifies and traces the activities of several key actors, Hungarian and non-Hungarian, and institutions that contributed to these efforts (such as the National Forestry Association and Károly Kaán). They sought to concretize Hungarian presence throughout the country. If this was not possible through demographics, then they did it through various schemes to establish Hungarian control over key mountain landscapes (p.67). Language played a key role, and the application of language politics to forestry serves as a comfortable introduction to environmental history for historians of the region that have not previously considered this as a lens through which to study its history. Chapters two and three are the strongest from the perspectives of narrative, discussion, and source analysis.

The fourth chapter examines conditions for forestry and exploitation during and after World War I. The difficulties of the wartime situation in Hungary, which included labor and material shortages, and the general breakdown of the relationship between the state and public had widespread impacts on forestry.

In the interwar years, the territorial losses Hungary had suffered led to a new reckoning: the loss of the country's most valuable and productive woodlands. A new challenge also emerged in the forestlands that still remained within the country's borders, as the vast majority of them were held on private large estates and were of lesser value in terms of composition. Balogh argues that these factors, plus an influx of refugee foresters from the lost territories, meant that new compromises had to be struck between the state and landowners (p.112).

The fifth chapter follows the impacts of the emergence of the post-World War II Stalinist regime of Mátyás Rákosi and the symbolic and economic importance of postwar afforestation efforts. These were heavily influenced, as Balogh argues, by Stalinist efforts to relandscape Soviet Central Asia, with Hungarian professional journals carefully following studies from the Soviet Union (p.132). At the same time, Balogh is careful not to overestimate the novelty of the Hungarian projects. Organizations such as the National Forestry Association had existed long before these campaigns began, and they tried to capitalize on the new emphasis on activism, admittedly rather unsuccessfully. The unpopularity of rural policies in general in Stalinist Hungary also complicated forestry efforts, but this began to change slowly after Imre Nagy's government came to power in 1953.

The sixth chapter follows forestry into the 1960s, with de-Stalinization opening new pathways for experimentation with species and improvement, with a particular and, Balogh argues, unfortunate emphasis on Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris* (p.164). This chapter reestablishes the focus on individual foresters and their agency during the socialist period, with the efforts of István Bánó and his seed orchards and cloning experiments serving as the main case study. The book concludes with a short chapter bringing the Hungarian case study back into a larger conversation about the Anthropocene and John McNeill's concept of the Great Acceleration.

Balogh's is an ambitious and important project. The emergence of the environmental lens as a normal implement in the toolchest of the historian of the region depends on the creation of works that are approachable from the traditional areas of scholarly focus, such as state- and nation-building, ethnicity, and the history of capitalisms. In this work, Balogh attempts to weave these themes into the environmental approach and vice versa. This is, in general, an approach that is more commonly found in the environmental histories of empire and the (post)colonial world, making Balogh's engagement with South Asian scholarship necessary. Another major strength is the richness and variety of the

primary source base and Balogh's collaboration with archivist Péter Homor, who also contributed to the monograph. Each case study is thoroughly documented, though a deeper discussion of the source base and certain case studies would have been valuable for scholars less familiar with Hungary.

As with any work, the book is not without drawbacks. The novelty of the approach and lack of existing research on Hungarian forests mean that Balogh is often fighting an uphill battle. At points, it seems as if there were simply too much to do and not enough space to do it. The fourth chapter offers a key example of this, with so much happening in the interwar period that case studies fly by quickly. In some ways, this is the nature of work in an emerging field. An environmental historian unfamiliar with the Hungarian (or East Central European) context may end up feeling lost in the number of case studies. At the same time, for a scholar somewhat new to environmental history but familiar with the region, the number of case studies can serve an important function, demonstrating how widely (and relatively painlessly) the environmental lens can be applied. With this book, Balogh has taken up two missions, both vital but difficult to balance: he evangelizes environmental approaches to Hungarian and area studies scholars and he introduces the East Central European context to seasoned environmental studies scholars unfamiliar with the area. Between these two, it feels more urgent to cater to the former, so these drawbacks may actually be strengths, depending on the reader's background.

Balogh's work is, overall, an important early contribution to the history of forests and forestry in the region, not just Hungary. The sheer number of case studies and archival gems promise dozens of additional avenues of research begging for further study and discussion, all packaged as ready to be integrated into the more traditional focus on state- and nation-building, capitalist and socialist politics and economics, and social-cultural evolution.

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