

A “Deák School of History”

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Abstract | *This article argues that—fully unintentionally—István Deák founded a distinctive school of history among the students he mentored. The school took inspiration from Deák’s captivating style, clear argumentation, and empathetic moral capacity. In particular, however, Deák and his students sought explanations for social, cultural, and political phenomena in East Central Europe outside the constricting boundaries of the nationalism that dominated this field of history. Before Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner revived constructivist theories of the nation from very different perspectives in the 1980s, Deák’s wary approach to nationalism and the Habsburg monarchy would become a key element that defined the school of historians that grew up around him. In doing so he and they radically reshaped our understanding of the region and its history.*

Keywords | *István Deák, Habsburg monarchy, Central European history, nationalism*

Few senior scholars accomplish as much original scholarship as did István Deák. And few tackle such a broad range of diverse topics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European history as did István, from Weimar Germany to the Habsburg monarchy, from 1848 to interwar Eastern Europe, to the post-World War II moment. Even fewer scholars have done it with such captivating style. István’s writing compelled the reader, in the famous words of Barbara Tuchman, to “want to turn the page.” He persuaded through sensible, logical, pragmatic, and above all clear arguments. Behind those arguments one always sensed an empathetic moral capacity that rarely excused the shortcomings of his historical subjects, and always sought to explain them.

Even fewer senior scholars have produced a recognizable school of historical thought and practice among generations of historians. For many years in his



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teaching, his mentoring, and even more, through his example, István produced an identifiable school of diverse thinkers mostly in the United States, but also in Europe. The scholars in question may belong to different generations, but together, and often in dialog with each other and with István, they developed distinctive approaches to writing the history of East Central Europe since 1750. Each of these many historians can and does trace their contributions to the field back to principles practiced, modeled, and taught by István. For these reasons, I have frequently referenced the critical influence of a recognizable “István Deák School of History” that in the past thirty years has profoundly transformed the way we write the history of Habsburg Central Europe.

István himself did not set out to create a school of historical thought or practice. In fact, he never saw himself in this role, and in conversation with me he vigorously disputed my references to such a school. I think he found the very idea of a school of history named for him to be overblown and perhaps a bit pretentious. Yet of all his well-known contemporaries, many of whom were historians of Europe with whom he taught at Columbia and other institutions, I venture to say that only he produced cohorts of scholars covering several generations, whose work continues to leave a recognizably specific mark on the field.

What exactly are the principles and approaches of this school? When did it start? How has it changed the ways in which scholars today approach the history of what I call Habsburg Central Europe since 1750?

The story of the school, like much of István’s life and career, rests on highly contingent Cold War histories and situations. István did not set out to become a historian of East Central Europe. Originally, he did not even seek to become a professional historian, although he happily took the opportunities that enabled him to pursue this career. He always maintained that circumstances rather than his own efforts had conspired to make him a historian of the region of Europe from which he had fled in 1947. István would originally much rather have been a historian of France, as he tells us in one taped interview about his career created by Holly Case and Máté Rigó.¹ This, he soon learned, however, was an impossibility for a young refugee in France. At Columbia in the early 1960s, István wrote a dissertation (and first book) on a group of intellectuals in Weimar Germany who produced the radical left-wing journal *Die Weltbühne*.² He did not write on a Habsburg Central European subject. The *Weltbühne* book, however, does show several traces of what would later become István’s distinctive style, stylistic characteristics that also inspired the Deák

1. Holly Case and Máté Rigó, “Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák,” eCommons—Open Scholarship at Cornell, Cornell University Library, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132>.

2. István Deák, *Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the Weltbühne and Its Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

School. These include Deák’s deep empathy for the personal complexities of his subjects and the historical quandaries in which they find themselves, what one reviewer on the press’s website refers to as “the passionate interest of a person who seems to have been a participant rather than a chronicler.”³ But the book’s place is solidly within the cultural, intellectual, and political history of Germany, not of East Central Europe. It did not engage directly with issues of nationality, confession, and ethnicity that dominated the field of Habsburg history at the time. Nevertheless, this first book did obtain for him his secure position at Columbia University.



Figure 1 | István Deák accompanying the Crown of St. Stephen on its return to the Hungarian government, 1978. (From the Deák family collection)

3. Product web page “Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the *Weltbühne* and Its Circle,” University of California Press, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520305649/weimar-germanys-left-wing-intellectuals>.

István claimed to have become a specialist in the history of East Central Europe largely because the circumstances of his early employment dictated it. In that same taped interview, he recalls that sometime around 1964 he had a meeting with Henry L. Roberts, then director from 1954–1967 of Columbia’s program on East Central Europe, and his doctoral supervisor Fritz Stern. Both told him that he could expect to assume a position at Columbia if he finished his dissertation within a year. That position, however, eventually also entailed assuming responsibility for what became the Institute on East Central Europe from Roberts, who left Columbia in 1967. István’s national origin, so to speak, dictated his professional trajectory.

I date the public if unintentional founding of his school to István’s now almost mythological intervention two years later, at a 1966 conference on Austria-Hungary and its collapse, held at the University of Indiana and organized by Charles and Barbara Jelavich. In its 1967 edition, the recently founded *Austrian History Yearbook* published a series of essays and comments based on that conference, and here we can locate István’s legendary contribution in which he provocatively disputed the collective wisdom of East Central European historiography, and really, of European history itself.⁴

The conference included contributions by several luminaries of Habsburg and Eastern European history from both sides of the Atlantic and both sides of the Iron Curtain. One of the panels was titled “The Ruling Nationalities.” As the invited commentator for this panel István issued a brilliantly and deceptively simple challenge to his colleagues. One can almost hear István’s voice in the spirited question he posed to the very topic the organizers had formulated. “Let me . . . take the bull by the horns and challenge the very topic of this discussion. It is my contention that the subject of this debate is neither justified nor valid . . . *I would argue that there were no dominant nationalities in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. There were only dominant classes, estates, institutions, interest groups, and professions.* True, German and Magyar nationals formed the majority of these dominant strata of society, but the benefits they derived from their privileged position were not shared by the lower classes of their own nationality.”⁵

Today, almost sixty years after the fact, I still read in these exciting words both a challenge to the standard historiography of the region and a road map to a new way to understand its history. In arguing that historians’ focus on nationalism both oversimplified that phenomenon and blinded them to more

4. István Deák, “Comments,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 3, no. 1 (1967): 303–8.

5. *Ibid.*, 303; emphasis my own.

important social, cultural, political, and economic factors, István called for the study of new kinds of topics in new ways. He especially questioned scholars’ steadfast acceptance of the blanket importance of nationalism as a kind of monolithic factor in history. István argued that by making the nation and nationalists the main characters in narratives about Austria-Hungary, we rendered many other important dynamics and actors invisible. More than that, by questioning the primacy of nations as subject or agents in history, he implicitly opened the door to questioning their very existence. Before Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner revived constructivist theories of the nation from very different perspectives in the 1980s, Deák’s wary approach to nationalism and the Habsburg monarchy would become a key element that defined the school of historians—both his own students and those of others he helped to mentor—that grew up around him over the next half century. Deák did not deny the power of nationalism and nationhood in Habsburg and post-Habsburg Central Europe, but by honestly foregrounding its many internal contradictions, its frequent absence from daily-life concerns, and its clearly situational character, he encouraged his students to question its presumed primacy in historical narrative.

We can observe this process in one sense simply by noting the popular practice of citing this 1967 comment over the past half century. By the 1990s this quotation had become a kind of starting point for a growing number of historians who sought to escape the overpowering hegemony of nationalism in history writing of East Central Europe and to understand Austro-Hungarian society more on other terms. By the 1990s too, István himself had produced two very different classics of history, *The Lawful Revolution* and *Beyond Nationalism*, both works that modeled in different ways the challenges he had issued in Bloomington.

István’s 1966 comment at the conference essentially asked whether it could really be true that a German-speaking peasant in Tyrol understood herself to belong to an emotionally powerful national community that also included a German-speaking peasant in Bukovina? Could it be true that both occupied privileged positions in society simply because of the language they spoke, a language that might not even be recognizable to each other or to other German-speakers in the monarchy? Could the same be said for Hungarian peasants?

Many historians presumed that the populations of the Habsburg monarchy had shared the nationalist commitments of their politicians. They believed that nationalist politics was a product of national feeling and not the other way around. But when historians questioned this dominant story, they often met the

reply, “Well, what was the alternative to nationalism?” Catholicism? Dynastic loyalty? Marxism? The presumption was that Austria-Hungary’s people must have somehow committed themselves in their daily lives to one single defined ideology, in this case nationalism, as opposed to Marxism or Catholicism. In fact, nationalist commitment was fundamentally a political quality, and formal politics may not have dominated the lives of all imperial citizens the way it did for professional nationalists.

The 1966 comment also opened doors to seeing this world in other kinds of terms. István’s question asked us to understand people’s loyalties, commitments, understandings, in terms of the particularities of their social worlds. The 1960s was, after all, a moment when social history emerged as a legitimate methodological approach, one that István embraced. People may forget this, but István was also the editor with Allan Mitchell of an important social history document collection created for undergraduates called *Everyman in Europe*.⁶ If you look at the topics of the dissertations István supervised, and also at those whom he generously helped who were not his supervisees at Columbia University, you will find a common impulse to approach these issues of loyalty, of identification, of worldview from a perspective of local society, of situation, rather than from a perspective of ideology or a perspective of the center of the state.

István and his students and their students have consistently placed people, not nations, at the center of their analyses. This is one reason István’s works are so beautifully readable. They place people and social worlds at the center. This is certainly true of his brilliant and stylish political biography of Lajos Kossuth, *The Lawful Revolution*, a book published in 1979, the year I first met István in New York when I began my doctoral studies at Columbia.⁷ It is equally true of his 1990 social and political history of the Habsburg officer corps, called *Beyond Nationalism*, an outstanding book that remains one of the most cited in our field. In that book, as István tells us, his goal was to understand one group of people who “had bonded the empire at that time.” “Who were the men who made up this strange, multitungued, multiconfessional, supranational band?” he asked.⁸

6. István Deák and Allan Mitchell, eds., *Everyman in Europe: Essays in Social History*, 2 vols. (New York: Pearson College Division, 1981).

7. István Deák, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). István dedicated this book “To my father who served Emperor Francis Joseph in the Great War and to the Memory of my great-grandfather who served Louis Kossuth in 1848.”

8. István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix.

István’s approach to history was never shaped by ideological compulsions, but rather by a kind of down-to-earth informed sensitivity to the beliefs, identifications, and self-understandings of ordinary people, even those ordinary people who occupied positions of extraordinary power. He also consistently reminded his students to compare, and to see East Central Europe more in European terms than his Cold War contemporaries did. If we examine the historiography of East Central Europe in the past decades, we can trace exactly how this down-to-earth approach and interest in the local, the personal, fueled his and his students’ efforts to change the terms of debate in the field and, especially, to develop new approaches to the history of the Habsburg monarchy. It may be a banal statement to point out that historical explanation changes over time. But who determines and shapes the new directions, approaches, and methodologies that develop? I believe that István’s work undergirded, shaped, and influenced the transformations of the field since the 1980s. There are of course other younger scholars whose work also shaped the transformation in the field, and most of them did so in dialogue with István, his work, and his arguments.

In fact, the Deák School of History has accomplished several extraordinary transformations. It has explored the much broader range of identifications, loyalties, and self-understandings of people in Habsburg Central Europe on their own terms. It has created a history for the region where ethnic conflict is not an inevitable, but a more contingent factor. It has effectively questioned the certainties of nationalist essentialisms, it has rehabilitated the importance of imperial strategies for patriotic renewal, and it has shown through examinations of individuals in local contexts how nationalist and imperial patriotic identifications often went hand in hand. To take two specific works by Dominique Reill, the Deák School approach demonstrates that in 1848–1849 some influential Italian nationalists in Austria opposed the idea that all Italian speakers should be united in a new Italian kingdom, fearing the ways it might ruin their Adriatic communities.⁹ Then in 1919, this same approach shows us how local patriots in Fiume believed that once the Habsburg empire had collapsed, their city could only remain great if it joined another empire, this time the Italian one.¹⁰ In neither case did nationalism determine popular feeling, even though it may have looked so to the outside world. Both cases demonstrate the importance

9. Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

10. Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

of starting with local and human stories rather than with nationalist presumptions. To take another highly influential historical intervention, Tara Zahra's seminal essay on national indifference as a strategic way to rethink personal loyalties and their contingency demonstrated in my view how István's earlier influential stimuli led to a profound reinterpretation of behavior, commitment, loyalty, and identification in Habsburg Central Europe.¹¹ There is sadly no space here to analyze or even begin to list the countless other important works and their authors who make up the Deák School.

Some may consider it a less relevant factor, but one cannot discuss the Deák School without also mentioning how István's personal qualities made him in many ways a model to those he mentored. His charm and his general enthusiasm of course attracted and motivated all of us who worked with him. More importantly, however, his seemingly effortless ability to create communities of engagement, passionate discussion, and happy sociability suggested to each of us that a professor's role could and should be far more than that of teacher. We each carry a responsibility instilled in us by István to bring together historians from very different places, to facilitate exchange, and to encourage and support younger scholars.

István always pointed out the ironies and self-contradictions that surrounded historical subjects, whether in comedic or tragic ways. This habit made history immediate and personal, never abstract, or bureaucratic. Perhaps it is precisely these personal abilities and qualities that made his scholarly contributions and mentorship so effective and influential. In sum, without indulging in the kind of selective imperial nostalgia that renders the complexities of history and its actors invisible, István offered a persuasive reassessment of the history of the home region of his family and childhood, and of what ought to be considered important about it. In the introduction to *Beyond Nationalism* he argued: "[I]t is of value to reexamine the Habsburg experiment, characterized, as it was, by a fundamentally decent administration, unheard-of liberties, economic progress, and a lack of political boundaries between the Carpathian mountains and the Swiss Alps. I am convinced that we can find here a positive lesson while the post-1918 history of the central and east-central European nation-states can only show us what to avoid."¹²

11. Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119.

12. Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 9.

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