

Introduction by the President of ESEH

In this notepad Andrea Kiss discusses the origins of environmental history in Hungary and more recent trends. Dr. Kiss has been the ESEH Regional Representative for Hungary since 2009. She is also the coordinator of the Hungarian group of the ESEH which has its own webpage in Hungarian (<http://www.geo.u-szeged.hu/eseh/>). The Hungarian group issues an electronic newsletter and it organises mini conferences and roundtable discussions in different locations in Hungary.

Over the last year, Andrea Kiss was actively involved in the preparation of the Biannual Conference of the ESEH – both as a member of the program committee and as a member of the Travel Grant Committee. Dr. Kiss is currently affiliated with Vienna Technical University and Szeged University.

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A brief overview on the roots and current status of environmental history in Hungary

The roots of environmental history in Hungary

Although numerous investigations were carried out on the historical relationship between society and the environment in Hungary during the course of the 20th century, these investigations usually came from other disciplines. One reason for this was that the discipline of environmental history was scarcely known in Hungary, or even in most of the neighbouring countries, until a decade or so ago. During the communist period, the historical relationship between society and the environment was mainly studied by historical ethnographers and historical geographers, and to a lesser extent by social and economic historians. Social sciences and related disciplines such as history, archaeology, geography and geology (those primarily dealing with palaeoenvironmental reconstruction) dealt with questions which today we would consider under the heading of environmental history.

Even if the disciplines that historical environment-related research ‘traditionally’ belonged to did not lose their importance, new directions, such as landscape history and historical ecology, also emerged and gained popularity, especially following the political changes in the 1990s. While landscape history (in which complex environmental problems are discussed) still retains its importance among the disciplines closely related to environmental history, historical ecology, with its heyday in the 1990s, is today somewhat less

prominent. This is also true for historical geography: fewer and fewer studies appear under this name pertaining to issues in environmental history.

Environmental history today is clearly understood in terms of its broader application, due to the active presence of natural scientists, which has been an important catalyst in the emergence of environmental history as a distinct discipline in Hungary. Although the last few years have seen some changes, papers related to environmental history are still published predominantly in Hungarian. A negative consequence of this is that the vast majority of environmental history research from Hungary (whether published decades ago or last year) is practically unknown in an international context.

The hidden discipline: centres for historical geography, ethnography and ecology studies

The 1980s and '90s saw the development of small groups – ‘schools’ of either historians or geographers devoted to exploring the historical environment. Studies that attempted to understand the historical environment in its complexity were to be found at all of the main science universities (i.e. Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen and Pécs), providing both detailed case studies and also broader works of synthesis, and environmental issues were also considered in the historical geography works of Sándor Frisnyák and his group at the Geography Department of Nyíregyháza College.

In the early days of environmental history research in Hungary, for several decades (covering the communist and the early post-communist period) historical ethnography played a fundamental role in the investigations of human-environmental interactions in history. In the 1950s and '60s many important studies were written and published in Budapest, and ethnographers in other parts of the country were also active contributors to the field. Outside of Budapest, the studies carried out at the university of Pécs (the works of Bertalan Andrásfalvy, and his colleagues) were especially influential from the 1970s onwards. While other centres of ethnographical research (also dealing with environmental questions, e.g. in Szeged) also started to emerge, the importance of the Pécs group can be traced through until the late 2000s.¹

Ágnes R. Várkonyi is probably the first important figure whose works introduced the complex historical understanding of environment-society interactions and as such, environmental history (whether seen as as part of social or economic history or historical ecology) started to become part of our historical understanding. Thanks to Ágnes R. Várkonyi's teaching activities at Budapest University, a generation of young historians discovered an interest

1. Unfortunately, following the retirement of Prof. Andrásfalvy, environmental history studies have greatly decreased among Pécs ethnographers. The last influential volume, a book of case studies in which authors from all over the country presented their works, was published in 2009: Andrásfalvy, Bertalan and Gábor Vargyas (eds.). *Antropogén ökológiai változások a Kárpát-medencében* (Historical ecological changes of anthropogenic origin in the Carpathian Basin). Budapest: PTE Néprajz–Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék–L'Harmattan, 2009.

in environmental issues. Through collaborations with other historians, studies on human-environment interaction in historical periods were also a feature of the 1990s. These studies were mainly in the field of historical ecology, under which name often complex environmental questions were discussed.²

However, from the first decade of the twenty-first century, studies in historical ecology were concentrated more and more on specific problems of ecology and landscape ecology, and thus environmental history was able to emerge as a separate discipline.

Environmental history: Rising prominence – broader understanding

Environmental history – as the name of a field – was not completely unknown in Hungary. Certainly not after 2001, the year in which the first ESEH conference was organised in St. Andrew's in Scotland: the first three Hungarian ESEH members were present, and later formed the small Hungarian ESEH group (with Lajos Rácz as regional representative until 2009). An important milestone was the environmental history summer school and workshop, organised by the Department of Medieval Studies at the Central European University in Budapest (2004).³ From around this time, environmental history teaching also became part of university curricula; first in the form of free (non-obligatory) lecture courses, going by the name of environmental history. These courses became part of the new BSC in Geography (in the form of lectures and practical seminars), for example at the University of Szeged (Faculty of Natural Sciences), and were also incorporated to the BA in Education at the same university (Teacher Training College, with Lajos Rácz).⁴ Additionally, environmental history-related disciplines such as historical climatology and landscape history are often taught at universities who understand their remit very broadly and discuss the extensions of relationships between humanity/society and the environment (for example, in Debrecen, Gödöllő, Budapest, Szeged and Sopron).

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2. R. Várkonyi, Ágnes and László Kósa (eds.). *Európa híres kertje. Történeti ökológiai tanulmányok Magyarországról* (The famous garden of Europe: Historical ecology essays on Hungary). Budapest: Orpheusz, 1993., and R. Várkonyi, Ágnes (ed.). *Táj es történelem. Tanulmányok a történeti ökológia világából*. Budapest: Osiris, 2000.
 3. This event was important on the one hand because a significant number of internationally accepted scholars, some of the leading figures of environmental history (e.g. Verena Winiwarter, Rudolf Brázdil etc.) were present, gave lectures and took part in the discussions for the first time in Hungary. Moreover, several Hungarian as well as foreign scientists, either established professors or early-carrier young researchers (e.g. PhD students) could be present, and – beyond these important scientific interactions – an edited book was published (entitled: Laszlovszky, József and Péter Szabó (eds.). *People and nature in historical perspective*. Budapest: CEU Medievalia, 2005).
 4. Lajos Rácz published his book (conceived as a university handbook) in Hungarian, *The Environmental history of Hungary until the modern period* (Magyarország környezettörténete az újkorig. Budapest: MTA Történeti Intézet, 2008).

A rather important element in environmental history in Hungary is the active presence of geological research, not only in studying long-term (Holocene) human-environment interactions, but also in shorter-term studies concerned with the changes of the last 1000-2000 years (related to either to the ten-year or hundred-year resolution analysis of a long-term series, or in looking at individual events). Such studies are carried out at both universities and research institutes, for example in Budapest, Szeged and Debrecen.

Despite the fact that probably little more than half a dozen Hungarian academics would declare themselves to be environmental historians even today, the number of scientists and historians dealing with environmental history questions is much greater (probably more than a hundred). At present, a biannual conference in environmental history, organised by the geologist Miklós Kázmér, plays what is probably the most crucial role in providing a platform for scientists from all disciplines (social and natural sciences) to introduce and discuss their research. Moreover, there have been two edited volumes of studies from various fields of environmental history (carried out by historians, geographers, archaeologists and geologists).⁵

Environmental history and the ESEH in Hungary – the present

The number of Hungarian ESEH members has increased from 3 to 18 in the last four years. As a consequence of this positive development there have been more activities organised exclusively for Hungarian ESEH members. Since more than half of the members are young scholars under 30, regular communication comprises an important part of our activity. Besides virtual contact via the e-mail list, Hungarian ESEH members come together annually for a meeting: this mini-conference (with oral presentations by members, discussions and roundtables) has taken place three times so far. In terms of ESEH outreach, ESEH activities are represented at the main environmental history and related conferences (Environmental History, Landscape History), in the form of short talks and papers (which have also been included in published volumes). A website has also been developed, aimed chiefly at Hungarian academics but with an international audience also in mind, that provides basic information, about the Society and about the Hungarian group.

5. Kázmér, Miklós (ed.). *Környezettörténet. Az utóbbi ötszáz év környezeti eseményei történeti és természettudományi források tükrében.* (Environmental history: The environmental events of the last five hundred years in the light of historical and scientific evidence). Budapest: Hantken Kiadó, 2009., and Kázmér, Miklós (ed.). *Környezettörténet 2. Környezeti események a honfoglalástól napjainkig történeti és természettudományos források tükrében.* (Environmental history 2. Environmental events from the Conquest up to the present in the light of historical and scientific evidence). Budapest: Hantken Kiadó, 2011.