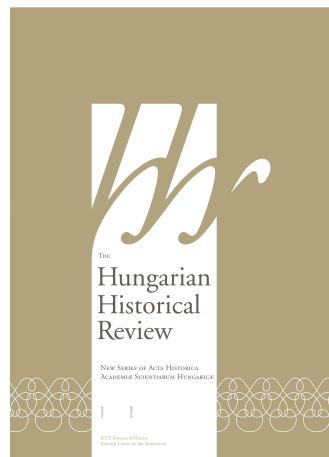


Zitierhinweis

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Enyhülés és emancipáció [Détente and emancipation]. By Csaba Békés. Budapest: Osiris, MTA TK, 2019. 397 pp.

Csaba Békés's new book offers a detailed analysis of Hungarian foreign policy in the Cold War, from 1945 until the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. It primarily aims to present a synthesis of Békés's ideas and arguments that were put forward in his extensive scholarship of the past few decades, but it also introduces new claims on the basis of new source material. Given its ambition to provide a synthesis, the book's emphasis remains on advancing broad arguments in relation to Hungary's entanglement with the Cold War, systematically supported by empirical evidence. The manuscript follows a chronological structure and it presents an in-depth discussion of the key events in the history of Hungary's international relations, starting with the Sovietization of the country after World War II and ending with the gradual collapse of the Kádár regime in the late 1980s. The individual chapters offer invaluable contributions to our understanding of the international dimensions of Hungarian historical events (such as the 1956 uprising and the events of 1989 in Hungary) and the role Hungary played in the shaping of international developments, most importantly the Prague Spring of 1968, the Helsinki Accords of 1975, and the process of détente, in general.

The most laudable aspect of the book is that it brings together—in a coherent narrative—the most important and most original claims and theoretical reflections which Békés has constructed over the years concerning the Cold War and Hungary's involvement in it. The two keywords that link the various arguments are the concepts that make up the title of the book: détente and emancipation. In the book, Békés proposes a new interpretation of one of the central notions of postwar international history and argues in support of the need for a new periodization of the Cold War. According to the central argument in the book, the process of détente started soon after Stalin's death in 1953, and it remained the key paradigm that fundamentally shaped international relations until the collapse of the Soviet Union. This proposition breaks with the traditional view in historiography, according to which the emergence of détente was tied to the second wave of de-Stalinization in the early 1960s, and it also refutes interpretations that consider détente to have ended in the late 1970s as a result of international tensions following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In critiquing views that break up the history of the Cold War into multiple phases, Békés claims that the Cold War could be divided into two main episodes. The period between 1945 and 1953 was characterized by blatant antagonism and

irrational decision-making, whereas the epoch starting with 1953 (“the second Cold War”) was fundamentally shaped by détente and a more rational and pragmatic approach to international relations. While Békés does not diminish the significance of international crises—such as the Cuban missile crisis or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—he argues that a tacit acknowledgement of the necessity of cooperation after 1953 prevailed over incentives to escalate conflicts further through military means. Interpreting events from this perspective, Békés claims that conflicts within the Soviet bloc never risked subverting the international status quo, and while they provoked tensions, those should be defined as “quasi-conflicts,” as they did not result in the radical reconfiguration of the *modus operandi* between the two superpowers. The book suggests that there were very few actual conflicts between the Soviet Union and the United States that had the potential to undermine the dominant paradigm of international relations: détente. It is argued, for example, that the antagonism provoked by the Afghanistan conflict merely put détente in a “standby mode.” In other words, the war did not lead to the total abandonment of the policy.

According to Békés, one of the main reasons behind the gradual (and constant) relaxation of tensions was the idea of “active foreign policy” advocated by the post-Stalin leadership in the Soviet Union. The notion triggered the transformation of the relationship between Moscow and the countries of the Soviet bloc, resulting in the slow but steady “emancipation” of the individual countries in the sphere of foreign policy. Khrushchev’s Soviet Union needed allies on the international scene rather more than it needed satellites, and this provoked the gradual decentralization of foreign policy on the peripheries of the Soviet empire. Békés argues that the main forum for negotiations, debates, and conflicts in Sovietized Eastern Europe was the Warsaw Pact. In contrast to traditional perceptions of the military alliance as a tool of Soviet supremacy and control in the region, Békés demonstrates that the organization actually contributed to the emancipation of the various countries and led to the formation of temporary, “virtual” coalitions in the bloc which pursued their own interests, independently of Moscow.

Emancipation and détente are the key themes through which developments in Hungarian foreign policy are interpreted in the period from 1945 to 1989. The book provides detailed and engaging analyses of key events and developments in the postwar era, with emphasis on late socialism in Kádár’s Hungary. The discussion revolves around the topic of agency in “the happiest barrack” and the gradual expansion of Hungary’s room for maneuver and political leeway as a

member of the Soviet bloc. Békés convincingly supports his overall thesis with an incredibly diverse range of sources, and he demonstrates that the Kádár regime often took—occasionally remarkably bold—initiatives in the international arena and came to occupy the position of an intermediary in East-West relations in the 1970s and 1980s. Hungary’s mediating role in the Soviet bloc is explored in a chapter on Kádár’s diplomatic efforts to provide a political solution to the Prague Spring in 1968, while the significant growth of Hungary’s international reputation in the late socialist period is analyzed most vividly in the chapter on the country’s contribution to negotiations culminating in the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975.

The book relies on a rich pool of source material to support its innovative and unconventional claims. The discussion is informed by a plethora of secondary sources, published mostly in Hungarian and in English, and evidence supporting Békés’s claims mostly comes from published as well as unpublished primary sources in multiple languages, including English, Hungarian, German, and Russian. Békés has also consulted an impressive array of archival sources, including collections in Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom, which contain material relevant to foreign policy and national security.

The extensive discussion of Hungary’s possibilities and constraints in international relations creates a solid foundation for Békés to advance an argument in relation to the multi-faceted (or multi-polar) nature of the late Cold War. Instead of offering a polarized analysis focusing on the theme of antagonism between the socialist East and the capitalist West, Békés claims that Hungarian foreign policy was dependent on three factors. Moscow’s role in shaping developments was inevitable throughout the period, but the book also argues that Hungary became increasingly dependent on access to Western markets and technology in the late socialist period. This dependence led to the adjustment of economic and political priorities and turned Hungary into one of the most ardent advocates of *détente*. At the same time, international dynamics within the Soviet bloc—conflicting agendas and “virtual coalitions”—imposed significant constraints on, but also provided new opportunities for Hungarian foreign policy.

While the book’s main emphasis is on the emancipation of Hungarian foreign policy after Stalin’s death, the notion of agency remains remarkably absent from the discussion of Stalinism and the Sovietization of Hungary after World War II. Indeed, the concept of Sovietization is not discussed in detail in the book and there is little attempt in the narrative to engage with the term

at a more abstract level in light of recent historiography. The meaning of the term, which is remarkably vague in the first place, changed significantly over the course of the twentieth century, and it meant different things at different times. Although Békés proposes a simple typology of Sovietization (quasi-Sovietization and pre-Sovietization), the book does not reflect on alternative typologies suggested by other scholars or on the notion of “self-Sovietization,” which assigns a certain degree of agency to local actors in the implementation of the Soviet model in the countries of the bloc. The somewhat teleological perception of Sovietization in the book could have been refined in conversation with recent works on the subject (most recently, Norman Naimark’s *Stalin and the Fate of Europe*), which highlight the importance of local politics and local actors in the immediate postwar years. Despite the slight under-assessment of the concept of Sovietization, the book remains an engaging read which offers a number of original contributions to the study of Hungarian foreign policy and, indeed, the history of the Cold War. This is a book that will remain an important point of reference in the future and should find a prominent place in university survey courses on the subject of postwar Hungarian and (East) European history, the history of the Cold War, or more specific courses on the history of the Kádár regime and the history of Hungarian foreign policy.

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