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CITIZENS ATTITUDES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

MAIN ARTICLES

János Simon

György Csepeli and István Murányi

David Kral Antal Örkény and Mária Székelyi

Amerigo Saldivar José Villegas

Marguerite Figeac-Monthus

REPORTS AND CONFERENCES

VI. Roma Life – Short CE Docfilm Fest

Call for proposal of IVF Standard Grant – 1 of December 2012

List of Approved Small Grants of IVF – November 2012

National Question in Central Europe - Budapest, Hungary 22–24 March 2013

BOOK REVIEW

Nikoletta Hossó

János Sallai: „An Impression of a Bygone Era – The history of the iron curtain". Hans Seidel Foundation, Budapest, 2012. pp. 240.

by Nikoletta Hossó

Behind the research

Although not the first known publication on the historical background of the Iron Curtain aiming to examine this decisive phenomenon of the historical footprint of the change of regime, this book yet stands out not only with its elaboration of currently available reliable sources but also because of the objective presentation based on scientific research of wide spectrum completed with the valuable personal experience of the author, and his own photographic memories illustrations found in the Appendix.

Today, in the world of globalization world, as a member of the European Union in the Schengen area, for the rising generation it may seem difficult to imagine that there was an era, a system, a "friendly" block of countries within Central Europe built upon an ideology where the freedom of movement to travel abroad without any border control was practically unknown. The period of cold war opposing the East and the West side of the world shortly after the Second World War has indefinitely closed the borders for the Hungarian people by establishing the Iron Curtain on the Western Hungarian state border and only on the 27 November 1987 that the passport valid in every country in the world was first issued removing the previous very severe restrictions on foreign travels.

Unique adaptation

As it is already stated in the Foreword and Introduction chapters, the aim of this monograph is to serve as a memento to recall the almost forgotten past events in details on a phenomenon which divided Europe in an unnatural way for 45 years. The construction then the dismantling of the Iron Curtain had changed the history of not only our country but the history of Europe; as its importance was once outspoken by Helmut Kohl, chancellor of Western Germany: "*Hungary knocked out the first brick from the Berlin Wall*!"

The author, as a way of introduction, first depicts the Austro-Hungarian border development process after the Trianon Peace Treaty and the Venetian Treaty (1921) then analyses the notion of the Iron Curtain, describes Hungary's post-war Western border changes where Border Guard troops had operated as an integral part of the Hungarian Defence Forces under the control of the Allied Control Commission and he also reflects on border changes which certainly had an impact on cross-border political, economic, cultural and familial relationships.

The main message and the gist of the book is embedded in the next three chapters on the descend of the Iron Curtain between 1949 and1956 – ie. the construction of the fence, a technical barrier system to completely close down the western border section.

Here, the Reader may experience the care and the remarkable level of detail with which the author - relying on especially the Hungarian National Archives documents – describes the entire process therefore the structural changes related to the Border Guards may be found here just as well as the occurring technical equipment problems, deficiencies or detailed rules on how to install minefields.

However, the author does not ignore the world's most important foreign policy events affecting our state borders, such as the Warsaw Pact, the Federal Republic of Germany joining the NATO, Austria's neutrality and the increasing international situation, as determinative impacts on the Hungarian border policy.

In accordance with the detailed completeness throughout the manuscript even the border related consequences of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution is depicted which may be lesser known to the public. In the chapter „*The glory and decline of the electric signap system*" the probably little-known S-100 device replacing the minefield in Hungary is described in detail.

Here, just as in the previous sections all relevant domestic political decisions behind as well as the technical - technological background; the conditions and difficulties of implementation and also the impact of the measures on the population living along the border are clearly revealed.

The last chapter follows the foreign and domestic political events from the dismantling of the electric signal system leading all the way to the „vestibule" of the change of regime, as far as the day of the Pan-European Picnic where the author mainly relies on personal interviews with the organizing members of the Picnic, adding authenticity to the script.

Overall I can say that each chapter of the book presents the 45-year-existence of the Iron Curtain from a multiple perspective reflecting on the relevant domestic and foreign policy events, emphasizing the issues concerning the national population living near the border, highlighting the technical-technological content from a professional point of view, showing the role of Hungarian Border Guards in the process which had been restructured a number of tims.

In the Appendix, the original photographic images, sketches, technical descriptions with trilingual titles and the author's own photographs further enrich the book. The unique publication in three-, Hungarian-English-German-language shall deserve international interest and appreciation due to the high level of translation work. Personally, I am certain that this book will serve as new source of information for many people regarding the history of the Iron Curtain, and I look forward to the continuation since - as the author also admits - the archives of the secret services in this specific field are not yet available.

Who knows how a new research using classified materials will complete or modify the here described in about, let us say, 10 years from now.