




## INTRODUCTION

# Vera Bácskai and urban history: life, work and impact

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### Abstract

This special section pays tribute to Professor Vera Bácskai (1930–2018), an outstanding Hungarian urban historian, one of the founders and former presidents of the European Association for Urban History. Vera Bácskai was an influential personality whose work and personal impact inspired generations of younger scholars. She played an instrumental role in the institutionalization of modern social and urban history in her homeland, while she also had a great share in creating the international networks and organizations that define the framework for European urban history to this day. The introductory article reflects on her life, career and impact, and it offers a thematic introduction into the articles of the special section.

This special section pays tribute to Professor Vera Bácskai (1930–2018), an outstanding Hungarian urban historian, one of the founders and former presidents of the European Association for Urban History (EAUH). Vera Bácskai was an

<sup>†</sup>The authors of this Introduction would like to thank Gábor Gyáni for his invaluable advice and comments on this text. The summary of Vera Bácskai's life and career is based on the following sources: Á. Tóth, 'Interjú Bácskai Verával' (Interview with Vera Bácskai), *Sic Itur Ad Astra*, 1 (1991), 83–7; 'Bácskai Vera életrajza' (Vera Bácskai's curriculum vitae), in Z. Bódy, M. Mátay and Á. Tóth (eds.), *A mesterség iskolája. Tanulmányok Bácskai Vera 70. születésnapjára* (Budapest, 2000); A. Keszei, "'Én kíváncsi történész vagyok": interjú Bácskai Verával' ('I am a curious historian': interview with Vera Bácskai), *Korall Társadalomtörténeti Folyóirat*, 1 (2000), 7–18; 'Hogyan lettem történész? A Korall körkérdése a pályaválasztásról. Bácskai Vera' (How did I become a historian? Interviews with historians in the *Korall Journal for Social History*) (*Korall Társadalomtörténeti Folyóirat*, 21–2 (2005), 162–5; G. Gyáni, 'A 80 éves Bácskai Vera köszöntése' (Laudation of 80-year-old Vera Bácskai), in I.H. Németh, E. Szívós and Á. Tóth (eds.), *A város és társadalma. Tanulmányok Bácskai Vera tiszteletére. A Hajnal István Kör – Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület 2010. évi, Kőszegen megrendezett konferenciájának kötete* (The City and its Society. Studies in Honour of Vera Bácskai. Proceedings of the Conference if István Hajnal Circle Organized in Kőszeg in 2010) (Budapest, 2011), 9–14; P. Kozák, 'Bácskai Vera', [nevpont.hu](http://nevpont.hu), accessed 10 Dec. 2020; s.n. [K. Halmos], 'Elhunyt Bácskai Vera' (In memoriam Vera Bácskai), obituary on the official website of Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities, [www.btk.elte.hu/content/elhunyt-bacsikai-vera.t2613](http://www.btk.elte.hu/content/elhunyt-bacsikai-vera.t2613), accessed 10 Dec. 2020; s.n. [the editors of *Korall Journal for Social History*], 'In memoriam Bácskai Vera', *Korall*, 71 (2018), 5–6; J. Pál, 'Vera Bácskai, "Grande Dame" of Central European urban history', *Asociația Colloquia*, 18 (2011), 175–85; G. Gyáni, 'In memoriam Bácskai Vera (1930–1918)', *URBS Magyar Várostartörténeti Évkönyv*, 12 (2018), 11–17.

influential personality whose work and personal impact inspired generations of younger scholars. She played an instrumental role in the institutionalization of modern social and urban history in her homeland, while she also had a great share in creating the international networks and organizations that define the framework for European urban history to this day.

Vera Bácskai's life and career were thoroughly affected by the times she lived in, mirroring the political constraints a scholar of her calibre faced in an Eastern Bloc country. However, the professional and personal vicissitudes she had to endure were also directly related to her involvement in politics and historical events.

Vera Bácskai completed her university education in Leningrad (present-day St Petersburg, Russia) in 1953, specializing in medieval history as the disciple of Alexandra Dmitrievna Lublinskaya. Upon returning to Hungary, she was appointed assistant professor at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest.

Her academic career, however, was severely disrupted by the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and its consequences. Vera Bácskai's husband, Gábor Tánzos, was the secretary of the Petőfi Circle, an organization of young intellectuals whose critical stance and activities – namely the organization of public debates and discussions – contributed greatly to the political fermentation prior to the 1956 uprising. Bácskai and her husband belonged to the circle of Imre Nagy, who assumed the role of prime minister during the uprising from 27 October to 4 November 1956. Nagy, a Communist politician whose earlier government between 1953 and 1955 had sought to reform the Stalinist regime, identified with the national revolt and its demands in October 1956; he was seen as the symbol of the revolution and later paid with his life for his role in it.

When the Soviet leadership decided to launch a military invasion to suppress the Hungarian Revolution, and Soviet tanks appeared in Budapest on 4 November, Prime Minister Imre Nagy and several other members of his circle, with Vera Bácskai and her husband among them, sought refuge at the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest. Upon leaving the embassy on 22 November, the Nagy group, including Bácskai and Tánzos, were captured and transferred to Snagov, Romania. When two years later they were returned to Hungary, several members of the group, including Bácskai's husband, were imprisoned. Tánzos was a defendant in the most significant and most representative trials, namely the trials of Imre Nagy and his associates. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison, but was amnestied and acquitted after four years in 1962. Numerous prominent figures of the revolution, including former Prime Minister Imre Nagy himself, were sentenced to death and executed in 1958.

Vera Bácskai thus spent two years in internment in Romania, separated from her little daughter, who had to stay in Budapest in November 1956. After returning to Hungary in 1958, Bácskai was not allowed to resume teaching at any university; instead, from 1959 to 1976, she was employed as an archivist at the Budapest City Archives. Meanwhile, in 1963, she acquired her doctoral degree (awarded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). Between 1976 and 1979, she continued her career at the Budapest History Museum as the head of the Urban History Department.

The regime's political purpose in keeping her away from academia and employing her in the archives was to marginalize her and isolate her from the main forums of contemporary scholarship. Bácskai, however, took advantage of the abundance

of primary sources available in the Budapest City Archives, deeply exploring the archival material at her disposal. As an archivist, and later as a museum curator, her interest turned toward eighteenth- and nineteenth-century questions and sources, and she soon emerged as an internationally renowned leading scholar of early modern and modern urban history.

While working at the Budapest City Archives, Bácskai was allowed to make study trips abroad again, and was able gradually to develop her international network. (In this special section, Peter Clark's survey provides a personal account of Bácskai's evolving relations with British scholars and the beginnings of their international network, which included urban historians in various other countries.) Already during this period, her junior colleagues at the archives – including the young Gábor Gyáni, today a historian of international acclaim, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the leading authority in the field of urban history in Hungary – benefited greatly from Bácskai's broad horizons, state-of-the-art knowledge and international embeddedness.

From 1979, she continued her career in the Centre for Central and Eastern European Research, run jointly by the Budapest-based Karl Marx University of Economics (today Corvinus University of Budapest). In 1982, Bácskai was awarded an advanced doctoral degree, the so-called Doctor of Sciences.<sup>1</sup> Within the Centre for Central and Eastern European Research, Bácskai worked as the head of the urban history group and created a vibrant social history workshop.

During the political transition in 1989–90, the system of higher education underwent a profound transformation and expansion in Hungary. In the increasingly liberal atmosphere of the 1990s, new colleges, universities and university departments were founded, and new institutional opportunities emerged for fields which had previously been suppressed or marginalized by the cultural and academic policies of the former state socialist regime. In that period of transformation and liberalization, Vera Bácskai returned to her first workplace, ELTE, where in 1991 she established the Department of Economic and Social History. She was the department's first chair between 1991 and 1995. She was full Professor there, and from 2000 until her death in 2018 Professor Emerita.

Bácskai played an instrumental role in setting up at her university a modern and internationally compatible system of postgraduate education. She launched a new Ph.D. programme in social and economic history within the ELTE Doctoral School of History<sup>2</sup> – to this day, the only Ph.D. programme in Hungary with such an explicit disciplinary profile. Meanwhile, she integrated her new department into the Erasmus Exchange Programme through the Tempus Grants Scheme, a scheme tailored to the needs of students and academics from post-Communist countries which were not yet members of the European Union. Over the following years, an entire strand of graduate students benefited from the opportunity,

<sup>1</sup>Doctor Scientiarum or D.Sc. (Doctor of Sciences), an advanced doctoral degree awarded by the Academy of Sciences in the Soviet Union and all the countries that adopted the Soviet-type organization of research and scholarship after 1948.

<sup>2</sup>In the early 1990s, the system of doctoral education was again reorganized in Hungary, and the right to award Ph.D. degrees was returned from the Academy of Sciences to Hungarian universities, together with the right to launch Ph.D. programmes and teach courses at the doctoral level.

pursuing their studies in Britain, Spain and the Netherlands in the 1990s – some hosted by the Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester.

Even though from 1956 to 1990 Bácskai was banned from teaching at any academic institution, she was a scholar of great influence, who tutored and inspired several fledgling scholars and helped launch the careers of innumerable young historians. After returning to the university in 1991, she taught, coached and influenced further generations of students and would-be scholars already in a regular academic milieu.

Bácskai played a crucial role in the institutionalization of urban and social history both in her home country and abroad. She was one of the founders and the first president of the István Hajnal Circle, an association of Hungarian social historians, at a time when traditional political history was still dominant in Hungary, and historians open to new currents and new approaches regarded challenging its primacy as their mission. Over the years, the István Hajnal Circle evolved into a highly renowned and influential organization counting several hundred members. Bácskai was also actively involved in the establishment of the European Association for Urban Historians, organizing one of its international conferences in Budapest in 1996, and acting as the president of the Association from 1994 to 1996.

At the beginning of her career, Bácskai was concerned primarily with medieval and early modern history. Her interest in urban history soon led her to focus on issues of early Hungarian urban development. She was particularly concerned with the evolution of seigneurial towns or *oppida*, which caught her attention as a specific form of urban settlement typical of less urbanized, semi-peripheral countries in the early modern era, and which she defined in contrast to royal chartered towns. Later, when employed by the Budapest City Archives, she started to work on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history of Buda and Pest, focusing on urban society, economy and governance. While she was among the first urban historians in Hungary to apply quantitative methods, she also pioneered the use of microhistorical methods in the study of urban elites and new entrepreneurial groups. Moving on to broader problems, her research yielded more comprehensive studies on the emergence of the modern bourgeoisie. In this field, she collaborated with Austrian and other Central and Eastern European scholars on various edited volumes and book series. She published extensively in English and German; her books published in English, *Towns and Urban Society in Early Nineteenth-Century Hungary* (1989) among them, brought her international recognition. Bácskai also co-edited several valuable editions of urban primary sources and published numerous articles in historical magazines for the larger public.

Out of her several hundred publications, her main publications are: *Magyar mezővárosok a XV. században* (Hungarian Seigneurial Towns (Oppida) in the 15th Century) (Budapest, 1965); with L. Nagy, *Piackörzetek, piacközpontok és városok Magyarországon 1928-ban* (Market Regions, Market Centres and Towns in Hungary in 1928) (Budapest, 1984); (editor) *Bürgerlum und bürgerliche Entwicklung in Mittel- und Osteuropa* (Budapest, 1986); *Towns and Urban Society in Early Nineteenth-Century Hungary* (Budapest, 1989); *A vállalkozók előfutárai: nagykereskedők a reformkori Pesten* (The Forerunners of Entrepreneurs: Wholesale Merchants in Early Nineteenth-Century Pest)

(Budapest, 1989); ‘Die Pester Grosskaufleute: Stadtbürger, Unternehmer oder dritter Stand?’, in E. Bruckmüller, U. Döcker and H. Stekl (eds.), *Bürgertum in der Habsburgermonarchie* (Vienna and Cologne, 1990), 21–30; ‘Small towns in Eastern Central Europe’, in P. A. Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), 77–89; with G. Gyáni and A. Kubinyi, *Budapest története a kezdetektől 1945-ig* (A History of Budapest from the Beginnings to 1945) (Budapest, 2000);<sup>3</sup> *Városok Magyarországon az iparosodás előtt* (Towns in Hungary before Industrialisation) (Budapest, 2002); *Városok és polgárok Magyarországon I–II* (Towns and Burghers in Hungary, vols. I–II) (Budapest, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

This small selection of articles reflects on and takes inspiration from Vera Bácskai’s rich oeuvre that spanned different periods, approaches and academic communities. Their common denominator is ‘urbanity’, not only in the sense of ‘urban life’, but also meaning ‘civility’ and ‘mental agility’, her qualities that the authors in this special section, all Vera’s personal friends and partly disciples, admired. At the same time, the studies offer fresh research results addressing issues on the current agenda of urban historians that are equally relevant for those readers of *Urban History* who did not have the good fortune to meet Vera Bácskai in person, and who should yet discover her rich and inspiring legacy.

In the same way as Vera Bácskai was interested in the history of capital cities (first and foremost Budapest) as well as that of small towns, the articles in this special section also engage with cities and towns on a broad scale. They originate from a conference entitled ‘The Eternal City’ organized in her memory at ELTE, her home institution for the last three decades of her academic career, on 16–17 May 2019, by the editors of this special section in collaboration with Mónika Mátay (ELTE) and Árpád Tóth (University of Miskolc). The selection reflects the international embeddedness of Vera Bácskai’s work, as well as her impact on generations of urban historians working on different periods from the Middle Ages to the modern period.

Three of the contributions offer an insight into topical issues of Hungarian urban history, a focus that complements the geographical range usually covered in *Urban History*. In accordance with Vera Bácskai’s personal interest, they focus on the late Middle Ages, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the second half of the twentieth century. The choice of chronological nodes also reflects her sensitivity towards periods when changes were palpable, when processes accelerated and when new trends emerged. As Gábor Czoch states in his article, ‘she regularly published problem-oriented methodological writings, in which she critically reflected on the situation and the results of her field, and proposed new research directions accordingly’.

The first of the three Hungary-related articles discusses a town type, namely the market town or seigneurial town (*oppidum*), which prior to Vera Bácskai’s seminal

<sup>3</sup> Available online at [https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/BFLV\\_VT\\_2000\\_budapest\\_tortenete/?pg=0&dayout=s](https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/BFLV_VT_2000_budapest_tortenete/?pg=0&dayout=s).

<sup>4</sup> Available online at [https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/BFLV\\_Vt\\_2007\\_varosok\\_01/?pg=0&dayout=s](https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/BFLV_Vt_2007_varosok_01/?pg=0&dayout=s) [https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/BFLV\\_Vt\\_2007\\_varosok\\_02/?pg=0&dayout=s](https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/BFLV_Vt_2007_varosok_02/?pg=0&dayout=s). For Vera Bácskai’s full list of publications, visit <https://m2.mtmt.hu/gui2/?type=authors&mode=browse&sel=10004510>.

work had been frequently misinterpreted in Hungarian historiography. Long before small towns became a fashionable topic in urban historical research, she analysed the number and economic functions of this specific town type, particularly in the fifteenth century, in order to define the degree of its urban roles and functions. Her 1965 monograph is still used as a point of reference on the subject. Her expertise on East Central Europe made her a worthy contributor to a pathbreaking collection of studies on small towns edited by Peter Clark three decades later. Katalin Szende's article pays tribute to Vera Bácskai's work by highlighting some aspects of the emergence of small towns from the 1300s onwards. It revisits this group of towns from the perspective of the interests and agendas of their owners and seigneurs, also inspired by the later decades of Vera Bácskai's career when she turned from large-scale structural overviews to the impact of personal choices and the history of families and individuals. At the same time, it joins the international discussions about the 'seigneurial turn' in the formation of cities and towns. Revealing royal models in fostering urban communities, as well as the scope and potential of local landowners to pursue the same goals on their own estates, add to our understanding of the genesis and social embeddedness of seigneurial towns in an East Central European setting.

Gábor Czoch's article revisits Vera Bácskai's paradigmatic paper examining the nineteenth-century emergence of modern citizenship and bourgeoisie in Hungary. As she pointed out, historiography failed to deal appropriately with the distorting effect of the fact that the burghers of free royal towns continued to rely on their status of medieval origin in defence of their privileged standing up until the 1848 Revolution. Czoch takes on the agenda set out by Bácskai, namely that both the negative representation of burghers in historiography and the view that makes a sharp distinction between the precursors of modern citizens and burghers need to be revised. Czoch offers an overview of discourses on burghers that the political elite articulated at the diets in the first half of the nineteenth century. As the contemporary opinions quoted in the article demonstrate, the perception of burghers was influenced both by the political fight for establishing a liberal legal system and the emergence of modern nationalism. In both respects, burghers were thought to have been standing on the wrong side. This perception became instrumental in the formation of several subsequent generations' negative attitudes. For a deeper analysis of this persistent view, the second half of Czoch's article examines the representation of burghers in historical accounts and secondary-school textbooks written in the second half of the nineteenth century. The analysis shows that they perpetuated the liberal nobility's critical views of burghers during the political struggles of the 1830s and 1840s. Therefore, the roots of burghers' negative representation date back to the ethno-lingual national discourse of this period.

The third article related to Hungarian history is authored by Erika Szívós, Vera Bácskai's disciple and current successor as chair of ELTE's Department of Social and Economic History. Her analysis of the personal aspects of architecture and urban renewal coincides not only with her former mentor's passionate interest in the social and architectural history of Budapest, but also with her lifetime's lived experience of East–West exchange and international knowledge transfer under the restrictive conditions of state socialism. (This is the main theme of Clark's contribution). In order to detect the ways city planning in state socialist Hungary was

influenced by international trends, Szívós' article is based on architects' memoirs, interviews, contemporary urban planning documents and several files held in the Hungarian state security archives. It explores the roles Hungarian architects, urban planners and other agents played in the transmission of novel ideas in the field of architecture and urban planning after 1956, with special regard to the renewal of inner-city areas and historic town centres. Szívós argues that with respect to professional relations, the divisive impact of the Iron Curtain seems, in retrospect, exaggerated. After 1956, and especially after 1960, Hungary was no longer hermetically closed off; Hungarian architects and urban planners had several opportunities to exchange ideas with their foreign colleagues in Western cities and in Eastern Bloc capitals during international symposia, study trips and the visits of delegations. In some cases, training opportunities and work contacts propelled Hungarian architects into stimulating international environments abroad. In that sense, they enjoyed broader freedoms than their colleagues in most other Eastern Bloc countries.

From the 1960s onwards, when the concept of the 'historic city' was promoted internationally, the exchanges detected in the study enabled Hungarian architects to keep abreast of contemporary trends. At the same time, the refreshed attitudes had a strong impact on the valuation of the built heritage and the preservation of historical cityscapes. In addition to portraying the increasing openness after 1960, Szívós also calls attention to various forms of state control – including state security surveillance – which nonetheless continued to characterize the system up to its collapse in 1989, affecting urbanists and architects, as well as all other professional groups. In fact, as the biographical sketch in the first half of this Introduction shows, Vera Bácskai's own life and career was overshadowed by the punitive and control mechanisms of the post-1956 regime. Szívós' conclusions are relevant for understanding the architectural heritage of socialist planning for today's cities, as they provide a more balanced view of how it transformed cities in Eastern Europe and beyond. It also directs the reader's attention to the study of the socialist city as an emerging branch of urban history.

Vera Bácskai's work was inspired by and inspiring for a broad circle of urban historians beyond Hungary. This group is represented by Penelope Corfield's elegant survey on a specific aspect of daily life in British towns in the long eighteenth century, namely the emergence and spread of greeting each other by a handshake as a novel form of 'urbanity'. The broad lines of development in the conventions of greetings across the eighteenth century show a clear trend, from deep bowing and curtsying to less theatrical forms of a brisker touching of the cap or head (for men) or a quick bob (for women). It is far from obvious, however, how the new form of urban greeting, the handshake, gained acceptance and popularity. Corfield sets up a research agenda to explore a broad range of literary sources, such as novels, plays, letters, diaries, etiquette books, travelogues and legal depositions, as well as artwork, to find traces of how one of the most banal daily routines appeared. Beyond the careful enumeration of the strengths and weaknesses of these widely disparate sources, Corfield pays special attention to the social context of each occurrence, which will eventually lead to a fuller understanding of how urban this new gesture was, and what its increasing popularity meant for turning practices of civic life into general societal norms. (Ironically, at the time of editing this special

section, the handshake is, at least temporarily, banished from our daily routines, replaced by socially distanced forms of greeting. This development adds to the attraction of discovering the past and thinking about the future of the handshake.)

The range of connections, networks and networking is completed by Peter Clark's survey, which is a natural and very personal extension of the more factual obituary at the beginning of this Introduction. In his recollections of their formative meetings and collaboration, the founder of the EAUH tells the story of how Vera Bácskai became one of the leading figures and, for two years, president of this Association. This encounter had a strong impact on the training of her students, for whom she arranged bilateral projects and exchange opportunities that she as a student could never have dreamt of. It was equally definitive for the pursuit of urban history in East Central Europe, since she organized the first conference of the EAUH in this region in 1996, which most of the authors of this special section attended in roles ranging from keynote speaker to graduate student.

In a recent study on the development of urban history as a discipline, Richard Rodger observed that 'The interplay – and overlay – of scholarship, friendship, and partnership has had durable and positive consequences for the study of urban history.'<sup>5</sup> Vera Bácskai's life, work and impact, to which this special section plays a tribute, exemplifies this interplay from an East Central European perspective. In our days, when the internal faultlines of Europe seem to be reappearing in a sharper form than ever since 1989, we need to remember these values, and continue practising them. This is how we can best preserve Vera Bácskai's intellectual legacy.

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<sup>5</sup>R. Rodger, 'Explorations in European urban history. Perspectives from Leicester', *Moderne Stadtgeschichte*, 2 (2020), 64–85, quote at 83. Vera Bácskai's role is repeatedly pointed out at 73, 76 and 78–9.