

Tomáš Homoľa, *Na vzostupe moci: Zahraničná politika Mateja Korvína v stredoeurópskom priestore v rokoch 1458–1471* [On the Rise of the Power: The Foreign Policy of Matthias Corvinus in the Central European Region in 1458–1471], Bratislava: VEDA, 2019, 192 pp.

For over one thousand years Slovakia was part of Hungary and then Czechoslovakia. Consequently, its history was often regarded by scholars as a fragment of the history of these two states. It was not until the ‘divorce’ with the Czechs in the early 1990s that Slovak historians could finally catch up by conducting research from ‘their’ perspective. The process of creating a new, ‘national’ historiography will certainly take time and we should wish our neighbours success in this venture.

This need to ‘catch up’ was behind the book analysed in this review. The young author (born in 1986) prepared his study, guided — as he writes — by two impulses. First, Slovakian historiography lacks reliable studies devoted to Matthias Corvinus, second — he is presented not as an independent monarch but as one of the elements of the Central European geopolitical set-up.

The author stresses that portraits of Matthias Corvinus by historians from various countries are in the 'national' spirit, which should be read as 'not quite objective'. He believes that a complete biography of this outstanding ruler by a scholar from Slovakia would be very desirable, but is a task for the future. The choice of Matthias Corvinus's politics in Central Europe seems to be a good decision. The king, known for his versatile activities in various fields, was very active in the sphere of foreign policy as well. It seems that his social policy achievements (replacement of elites, support of petty nobility against the oligarchs), extensive patronage of the arts and support for humanistic trends are better known than his actions on the international stage.

The title of the study features the term 'Central European area' and this makes it necessary for the author to explain the meaning of the term, which has a vast literature on the subject — particularly worthy of note in Poland is Jerzy Kłoczowski's contribution.¹ For Tomáš Homola the term denotes the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as well as the Kingdoms of Hungary, Bohemia and Poland. Such an approach does not raise any doubts and neither does the author's chosen time frame. In 1458 Matthias Corvinus was proclaimed king, while the year 1471 was marked by the death of George of Poděbrady, among others. These thirteen years encompassed about one-third of Corvinus's reign, but were a clearly distinct period. Significantly, both Corvinus and George of Poděbrady did not come from traditional ruling dynasties but from the nobility, which is why they were often regarded as upstarts. Yet this similarity did nothing to resolve the long-standing conflict between them. The significance of 1471 is further enhanced by the fact that this was also the year of a change on the papal throne. Paul II, who looked favourably upon Corvinus, died and his successor, Sixtus IV, kept a far greater distance from Hungary's ruler.

The monarch, temperamental and prone to taking controversial decisions, has had a colourful portrait of himself painted by authors of sources and historiographers. Chronicles originating in Hungary idealized him; Antonio Bonfini, an Italian resident at the royal court, compared him — as was the fashion of the day — to Alexander the Great, Hannibal and Hercules. The man who broke ranks with the chorus of Matthias Corvinus's eulogists was the author of the so-called Dubnica Chronicle, who criticized both Corvinus and his father John Hunyadi for their aggressive policy towards Bohemia and Austria, which enabled the Ottoman Turks to attack southern Hungary. Bohemian sources — unsurprisingly — bore a grudge against Corvinus for fighting against George of Poděbrady, while Jan Długosz looked at him from the perspective of the Jagiellonian *raison d'état*. The Polish historian was surprised that the Hungarians chose a lowly born usurper instead of supporting the Jagiellons' rightful aspirations to the Hungarian throne. From the eighteenth

¹ Cf. Jerzy Kłoczowski, 'Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia i jej miejsce w Europie', *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 5, 2007, pp. 11–31; idem, 'Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia jako przedmiot badań', *KH*, 120, 2013, pp. 833–43.

century the picture of Corvinus based on chronicles was enriched thanks to the use of diplomatic sources. The nineteenth century, a time of 'national revival', brought a glorification of Matthias Corvinus in Hungary and George of Poděbrady in Bohemia. The high opinion of the latter — formulated by František Palacký, who reviled the King of Hungary as an enemy of the Bohemians — created a paradigm which continued to function in Czech literature for some time. Among the Hungarian studies, in addition to the earlier glorifications, there also emerged papers in which the view on Matthias Corvinus's reign was much more balanced.

The structure of the book under review is an example of a rather successful compromise. In nine successive chapters the author begins with the state of research, then proceeds to describe the difficult beginnings of Matthias Corvinus's reign and the 'emergence' of the monarch on the international stage in foreign policy; in addition, the author discusses heretical Bohemia as a destination of crusades. He goes on to analyse the imperial aspirations of the two neighbouring monarchs — Matthias Corvinus and George of Poděbrady — in the following chapter discusses the two rulers' wars in 1468–69, and then presents their frantic efforts to find allies in Europe towards end of the Bohemian king's reign. The analysis ends with the author's remarks on some principles and rules of foreign policy and diplomacy in Corvinus's times, with elements of symbolic communication. The book's narrative is largely chronological, although the author discusses some issues — important in his view — separately. All this makes up a fairly clear picture. Let us look now at some selected topics.

They include the legitimization of the power of the 'usurper'. The fifteen-year-old king had a regent, Siládi, to help him, but whether and for how long the regent wielded power is still a matter of discussion. Without settling the matter, as a reviewer I would like to point out that John of Luxembourg was elevated to the Bohemian throne at the age of fourteen and he immediately began to exercise his power, as is evidenced by the privileges he issued for the nobility. Thus it is easy to imagine a situation in which the fifteen-year-old Matthias Corvinus seized power and reigned on his own.

At times the author of the book gets slightly lost; for example, he stresses several times that because of the Thirteen Years' War Casimir Jagiellon did not get involved in the events in the south, and then he is surprised that the King of Poland did not take action against Corvinus — although he has already provided an explanation why this was the case.

The paths of the two 'upstart' rulers, Matthias Corvinus and George of Poděbrady, crossed constantly as a result of, among others, the similarity of their situations. Both had to prove their 'legitimacy', and both attracted the interest of the papacy, which — especially during the pontificate of Enea Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini, that is, Pius II — was obsessed with the idea of organizing an anti-Turkish crusade: both rulers were taken into account as possible leaders of such a venture.

The possibilities for Matthias Corvinus to pursue his own foreign policy increased considerably after his coronation in 1464. The monarch carefully

built up his position, entering into an anti-Ottoman alliance with Venice in 1463; in 1463–64 he mounted a successful military campaign in Bosnia with the financial support of the papacy and the Italian cities. From that moment Matthias Corvinus began to focus his attention on his international activities on Central Europe, on Bohemia and the lands of the German princes; there was also a clear rapprochement between him and the Hohenzollerns.

Hungarian-Bohemian relations evolved in line with the changes in the European configuration. Pope Pius II had a very clear hierarchy of priorities: his main enemy was the Turks, so a crusade against them could be led even by the Hussite king, George of Poděbrady. The situation became more complicated when in 1462 Pius II rejected the Compacts of Basel and his successor excommunicated the heretic king in 1466. Now the pope began to look for allies to crush George of Poděbrady for good. Matthias Corvinus was not yet taken into consideration, because he had to fight a rebellion in Transylvania and, together with Emperor Frederick III, he was planning to support Prince Skanderbeg of Albania; the Turkish threat was still there at the time. George of Poděbrady continued his usual activities. In 1462–64 he announced the well-known plan to create a union of European states which would stand together against the Turks. The plan had the potential to create a new balance of power on the European continent, because the leading forces in it — alongside Bohemia — were to have been Poland and France. This undermined the hitherto dominant position of the empire and the papacy. Matthias Corvinus decided to wait and see what would happen, although he did not refuse his support. Nothing came of George of Poděbrady's initiative, but the Bohemian king did not give up and in 1467–68 he once again tried to organize a similar alliance. This time the alliance was to have been clearly directed against the pope and the emperor, and was to have brought together the Duke of Milan, the Margrave of Brandenburg, the Saxon princes, the Kings of Poland and Denmark, all led by the King of France, Louis XI. The plan also provided for a convocation of an ecumenical council and limitation of the pope's power. Louis XI refused, because he had to fight a rebellion of the nobility and was in ongoing conflict with Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy.

Homola devotes a short separate chapter to plans of crusades against the Kingdom of Bohemia. He mentions how the papacy urged Casimir Jagiellon of Poland to take on the challenge. The papacy's efforts were in vain, and Homola seems to be surprised by the Polish king's attitude. This may stem from a lack of familiarity with Roman Heck's study² on the Polish-Bohemian pact concluded in Głogów in 1462 with far-reaching mutual obligations. This suggests that Poland — not a priority for Corvinus, but still important — has not been carefully analysed by Homola. However, we have to agree that Casimir Jagiellon did seriously consider the prospects for the Bohemian throne, though not as a result of a military intervention but lawful election by the people of that country.

² Roman Heck, *Zjazd głogowski w 1462 r.*, Wrocław, 1962.

Homola skilfully deals with the difficult question of whether Matthias Corvinus had any ambitions to become emperor, and if so, whether these ambitions were realistic. Such dreams must have existed; the pope and the emperor made such suggestions, but this may have been only a game to fuel the conflict between Matthias Corvinus and George of Poděbrady. In any case, there were more candidates for the highest secular dignity, for example Charles the Bold of Burgundy as well as George of Poděbrady, who even pursued an intense propaganda campaign for the purpose, citing the need for a structural reform in Germany. The question of the election of the King or Holy Roman Emperor sometimes eludes rational calculations — who would have thought, for example, that John of Luxembourg's father, Henry VII, who ruled the small duchy of Luxembourg, would become emperor.

The war between Matthias Corvinus and George of Poděbrady in 1468–69, which ended in an alliance, must have surprised many contemporary observers. The Hungarian king dreamed of marrying Casimir Jagiellon's daughter, Hedwig, in order to make it easier for himself to seize the Bohemian throne, but Poland's king was not interested. The war resulted in a state of diarchy in Bohemia, which lasted until Corvinus's death in 1490, with Corvinus's position certainly getting stronger along the way.

The highest point in Matthias Corvinus's foreign policy came probably in 1470, when the king met Emperor Frederick III in Vienna, hoping to win the support of both the pope and the emperor. The war between Matthias Corvinus and George of Poděbrady reflected a typical medieval pattern, with a lot of movement of armies but few battles.

Worthy of note is the information about George of Poděbrady challenging Matthias Corvinus to a duel if the latter refused to conclude a peace treaty. Homola cites the relevant sources, but unfortunately he does not provide a broader view on the matter. After all, a duel between rulers was one of the great dreams of the Middle Ages — to prevent bloodshed, the monarch winning the duel won the war. This ritual thread has been analysed by many scholars, including Johan Huizinga.³ It is a pity that the young author of the book under review is not better versed in the literature on the subject.

After finishing his chronological narrative, Homola goes on to present the main principles of diplomacy in Matthias Corvinus's times, and to discuss symbolic communication and negotiations. Unfortunately, these fragments are the weakest parts of the book. If they were intended to 'lay the ground' for the author's analysis of the meanders of Corvinus's foreign policy, they should have been placed at the beginning of the book; it is hard to justify their position at its end — they are pointless there. When it comes to the content of these general reflections, they give rise to various doubts. Trying to present a topic a thorough

³ Johan Huizinga, *Jesień średniowiecza*, vol. 1, Warsaw, 1967, pp. 182 ff.; cf. for example Werner Goetz, 'Über Fürstzenweikämpfe im Spätmittelalter', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 49, 1967, pp. 135–63.

analysis of which would require several volumes on twenty or so pages inevitably produces banal statements. Five lines in a footnote on knighting and the role of the sword are not enough; that rulers held sumptuous feasts is again something we have known about for a long time.

To end my reflections on the young Slovak scholar's book I would like to say that despite some harsh words I do consider the book to be useful — despite its shortcomings — mainly because it fills a gap in research, because it puts the analysed material in order and — last but not least — because the author seeks to maintain distance from his subject matter.

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