

What are the tasks of the VERITAS Research Institute for History? What was the purpose of its founding?

The government of Hungary created the VERITAS Research Institute for History by passing Government Regulation 373/2013. The institute came into existence on January 2nd, 2014. The tasks (objectives) are outlined in detail in paragraph four of said regulation. That paragraph specifies precisely the intentions of the founding of the institute and the tasks therein. In a nutshell, I would summarize them as follows: A thorough examination of the period lasting from 1867 (the year of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise) to 1994, particularly the traditions associated with Hungarian public law, historical events that are important from a national unity perspective (which is to say, that bind the Hungarian people), the circumstances of the System Changeover (the transition from communism) and the undertakings of the first democratically elected Hungarian government since 1945. Moreover, the institute strives to provide a clearer and better understanding of the post-1945 era (the 1950's, 1960's, 1970's and 1980's), of the historical picture that has developed despite being unsubstantiated by facts and difficult to reconstruct.

How has the Orbán government reinterpreted certain milestones of Hungarian history? What was the role of the VERITAS Institute in this?

I feel that the question is not necessarily one that a director of an academic research institute should be asked, since I do not believe that governments are capable of reinterpreting „milestones of Hungarian history”. Events of history are researched and findings shared with the public by historians. Findings have contradicted the expected result on more than one occasion. During the eight years of the Orbán government, the date of the Hungarian Conquest of the Carpathian Basin has not changed, nor has the Kingdom of Hungary defeated the Ottoman Empire at the Battle of Mohács, nor has the Hungarian Second Army stopped the attack of the Soviet Red Army at the Don River in January / February 1943. However, we can no longer say about the latter event, for example, that the Hungarian Second Army suffered 200 thousand casualties, as was historically accepted from the 1950's into the 1980's. Moreover, we now also know that the accomplishments of the army from a military perspective were significantly greater than what “socialist historiography” had claimed for decades. The research fellows of the VERITAS Research Institute for History wish to expand the historical knowledge base of the public by sharing academic works; to provide nuance on data and perspectives that have been false for decades; and to disprove these in many cases. Its impact and significance cannot be known for another few decades. To this day, we can feel the strong influence of post-1945 historical works that on more than one instance have, to put it mildly, lacked a factual basis, or on the other hand, have generalized. I do not see that there has been a “reinterpretation of milestones”, nor am I aware of the VERITAS Institute receiving tasks of this type and their being carried out. If you know of any instances, please share them with me.

Why do you believe that it is necessary to reinterpret or rethink Hungarian history?

History is by no means a fossilized finished process. If you take a look at events from the past many centuries, you will see that historiography always reinterprets the process; in the quest for the root causes of events, historians (may) come face to face with new results. How many times have the histories of Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire been read? How many interpretations are there of the 1917 Russian Revolution? How have the histories of the American Revolutionary War and Civil War been rewritten? Lately how is slavery considered, which was already long gone from Europe during the leadup to the American Civil War? Why are the endeavors of outstanding statesmen from bygone eras being reevaluated by more modern moral and political norms? Using these examples, I have simply tried to show that history is rewritten / reevaluated time and again. On the other hand, what cannot / is not reevaluated are facts. If the Kingdom of Hungary as a result of the Treaty of Trianon lost two-thirds of her territory (excluding Croatia) and one-third of her Hungarian population, that cannot be “rewritten”. The questions surrounding that tragedy, the wounds of which remain unhealed even today, which is to say, questions of why, how, by whom, etc. are open to analysis, with research results leading to various conclusions.

Many people have criticized the recent reinterpretation of the WWII years of the Horthy Era. What is the official viewpoint of the Institute concerning this?

It is not an easy task to answer a question that opens with the phrase “Many people have criticized...”. And according to others, many more people do not view the given era as you have formulated it in the question. I would not refer to it as reinterpretation. Historiography attempts to look at political, social, economic and military questions of the given era. For if someone were to draw a conclusion of the era on the basis of historical works written between 1945 and 1980... At that time, it “behooved” the historian to refer to the social arrangements of the era as fascistic, which they were not (Nowadays only a handful of partisans lost on the byways of history make such a claim.) At one time the “133 days” of the Republic of Councils in Hungary were referred to as glorious; they were no such thing and provided the framework for the everyday terror acts of the communist dictatorship.

If it is considered a reinterpretation, in contrast to the earlier wording, to refer to Hungary during WWII as an “unwilling satellite”, to use the words of onetime US Ambassador to Hungary John Flournoy Montgomery, rather than as an enthusiastic servant of the National Socialist Third Reich, then I accept the term “reinterpretation”. If I accept the language used by the late György Ránki, according to whom Hungary had been caught on an inescapable path (or put differently, caught between a rock and a hard place) during the Interwar period, a path, like Trianon in 1920, onto which Hungary was forced, then likewise, I accept the reinterpretation moniker.

In WWII, Hungary did not join the German–Italian Axis out of some ideological and / or political solidarity with those two Great Powers of Europe; instead Hungary sided with them because it was hoped that a partial revision of the Treaty of Trianon would be possible with their assistance. Concerning its stance on a potential revision, Hungarian society was united,

irrespective of an individual's social standing, financial wellbeing and / or religious affiliation. At that time the political and military leaderships of Hungary surmised that the war between Germany and the Soviet Union would be short-lived, culminating with a German victory. And if Hungary was not on the side of the victor – vis-à-vis the Slovak state and the Kingdom of Romania, both of which had joined the war against the Soviet Union earlier – then the results of the revision would be nullified. Emphasizing these aspects, in my opinion, does not rise to the level of reinterpretation. Moreover, these facts were lightly considered or brushed aside entirely by earlier historical interpretations, which, in order for one to form his own opinion on the era, provide much needed perspective. Now please contrast this with the historical works of the Kadar Era (“lamented” and missed by some [or is it many?]) and their authors, numerous of whom believe that their works have endured the test of time, even thirty to forty years after initial publication. On the other hand, I believe – and this applies to me as well – that when writing history, it is more authentic to do so outside of the box, without boundaries, instead of limiting our views because of certain restrictions. This is how it has been since 1990, and the Orbán government era that began in 2010 is no exception.