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A historical and politico-geographical analysis of Hungarian-Polish border before 1939 in the Hungarian historical geography

Abstract: The historical development of the common borders took place in many respects simultaneously since the epoch of the two states' establishment. The territories and borders of both states have greatly changed ever since, yet during the periods of joined kingdom the common borders always showed a high degree of stability.

The first description of the common state borders can be found in the Anonymous Latin Gesta by around 1200 AD. From the 15th century on, the Hungarian Parliament on several occasions appointed and sent different committees by legal acts to the borders of neighbouring countries, including Poland, in order to delimit or adjust its state borders.

Due to the threefold dissolution of the Polish State, the former common border fundamentally changed. After the First World War, the common state border between the reborn Poland and the historical Hungary completely vanished after the latter lost some two-thirds of its territory.

During the Second World War the common borders were restored for a short time through which thousands of Polish escaped to Hungary.

Thus, the partially shared state history and the changing (disappearing and reappearing) common state border represent an international singularity in many respects.

Keywords: Poland, Hungary, borders.

Introduction

Internet users have an almost unlimited access to a wealth of (more or less accurate and credible) animations illustrating the transformation of European borders over the past one thousand, five hundred, two hundred, *etc.* years. These provide seemingly exhaustive and instantly available information on the evolution of European state territories and borders. In Hungarian geographical research, the interwar years brought a new impetus to the study of “state biographies” and “state border biographies”. The issue has long since been explored by representatives of “traditional cartography” in most countries of Europe (generating process analyses that went beyond a mere presentation of the actual characteristics of territories and borders in diverse historical atlases). However, the study of these

processes gained special momentum in the post-World War I period. In Hungary, Pál Teleki, Albert Halász, and András Rónai were the most prominent figures of this strand of research in a Hungarian and European context.

The paper provides a brief review of efforts in Hungarian historical-political geography (focusing on the work of Albert Halász¹ and András Rónai²) targeting the description and interpretation of these historical processes. Albert Halász (1890–1945), owing to his cooperation with statisticians, historians and the construction of a research database, obtained access to the entirety of historical (scientific and educational) atlases published in Europe. (He attempted to provide an exhaustive outlook through the use and inclusion of atlases published in the then Soviet Union among his bibliographical references).

The main point of reference for Halász was the core territory of the continent (he did not include the British Isles or Scandinavia in his analyses), since his work was mainly focussed on Central European processes. He illustrated historical divisions on transparent tracing papers, inserting the natural geographical base map of the continent underneath. Halász's awareness of identical natural geographical milieus presenting distinct political divisions sets him apart from the current of geographical determinism.

He was immediately confronted with the presence of heterogeneous spatial and border configurations in his diverse sources depicting the same era, which necessitated certain compromising decisions on his behalf regarding the selection of credible and reliable sources.

Such contradictions and compromises challenged the credibility of the information displayed on Albert Halász' maps, yet he took full responsibility of the consequences and debatable nature of his decisions. In the case of Hungary, the high stakes of identifying the power-political space of the country or the kingdom as an "evident" underlying basis of his research was not without problems, either.

The economist András Rónai (1905–1991) began to study Central European states and state biographies from the early 1930s. His chief area of interest was the perennity of states and borders, he performed comparative research, devoting considerable energies to studying the unique history of Poland. His Central European Atlas published in 1945 is a basic reference point for anyone doing research on this specific area.

¹ Albert Halász was born in 1890, and after concluding his studies in chemical engineering, devoted most of his energies to economic statistics. Post-1918, his research was focussed on the exploration of spatial processes and the history of borders in Central Europe. Albert Halász, rendering a great service to the Hungarian nation through his outstanding and significant scientific work, became an exile and later a victim of fascism in 1945.

² András Rónai (1905–1991) was the student of Pál Teleki at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Budapest, and later his colleague in the Institute of Economics and Political Geography. Rónai was a prominent figure of Hungarian border studies in Central Europe from the early 1930s until 1948.

The constant evolution of European political space

The restructuring of political power, relations of domination and state territorialities was a permanent feature of the European continent under Barbarian and Christian rule alike. National and overview atlases of European history – particularly those covering early historical periods – do not tend to provide a uniform description of state territorial relations. Besides a lack of data, this stems from the existence of countries where the “current” state of affairs was the privileged subject of research and others where the retro-projected character of their actual territory was being stressed.

Since the period of the Conquest (895/896), the Hungarian settlement area, and the later on the territory of Hungary has been aligned to the dominant European trends of the day. It is not by chance that the lengthy and uncertainty-laden monograph of Sándor Márki was published during the ceremonies commemorating the 1000th anniversary of the Conquest. The presentation of state geographies and territorialities of Europe during the period of the Conquest was a serious challenge for Márki, a historian well trained in historical geography as well. Available sources and the extensive international literature did not allow for a wholesale reconstruction of the existing conditions in every area. His attempt to define the position of Poland – despite his utilisation of Polish sources – has been limited (Márki 1897).

The evolution of European political space saw periods of relative stability of state borders, while various fault lines were triggered by concrete events or post-war territorial reorganisations that effected a fundamental modification of the spatial order of Europe. The evolution of the hierarchical system of European state territorialities and borders was shaped by post-war bi- or multilateral peace treaties (Marczali 1920).

Albert Halász carried out preliminary studies that made it possible for him to select the temporal scope of his research. To avoid national bias, his choice fell not on the period of the Hungarian Conquest but the year 950. The over 500-year-long period of territorial reorganisations between 950–1519 (Fig. 1) constitutes a particularly exciting phase in the history of Europe (from the perspective of its Central and Eastern components). Hungary and its current neighbourhood were in a constant flux during these years (with only the Hungarian-Polish border displaying a high degree of stability). The period also saw frequent and fundamental territorial reorganisations along the southern border sections. In the case of the Balkans, imperialism, the changing of empires, and small state processes and strives were coextensive.

In Poland, the birth of the Christian Kingdom and dynastic relationships between the Hungarian-Polish royal families created remarkably peaceful conditions along the common borders of contemporary Europe. Poland, within the

context of the long-term system of Hungarian foreign policy (Herczegh 1987) and military conflicts (Bánlaky 1928) represented a “peaceful and friendly neighbour” in the eyes of the Hungarian political leadership.

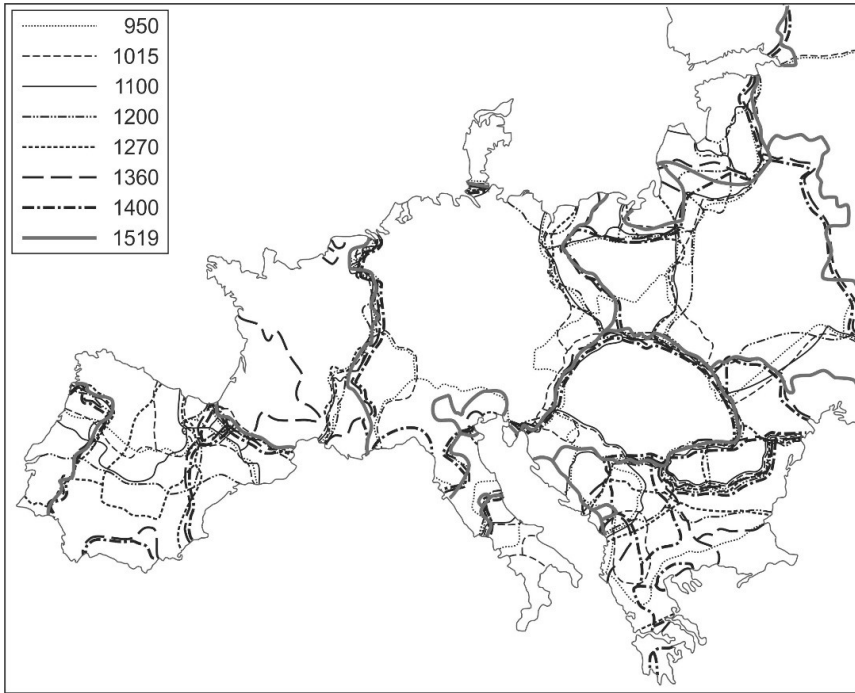


Fig. 1. The evolution of Central European and Hungarian state borders, 950–1519

Source: A. Halász (1936).

The spatial development of the two countries was quite heterogeneous from the 1500s onwards. Hungary fell apart after the 1526 defeat by the Ottomans (and was divided into four parts for a brief period) while Poland was transformed into an effective European great power during certain periods. Nonetheless, peaceful conditions reigned uninterrupted along their common borders.

During the period between the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and the post-Napoleonic reorganisations, (Fig. 2) state borders already begin to show signs of nodalisation and become solidified along extensive territories, while various border intersections remained quite turbulent. Poland had a central role in the expulsion of the Ottomans from Central Europe. The Polish king, John III Sobieski had a key role in the relief of Vienna from the Ottomans in 1683, and the Polish troops joined the battles in Hungary, participating in the reconquest of Buda in 1686.

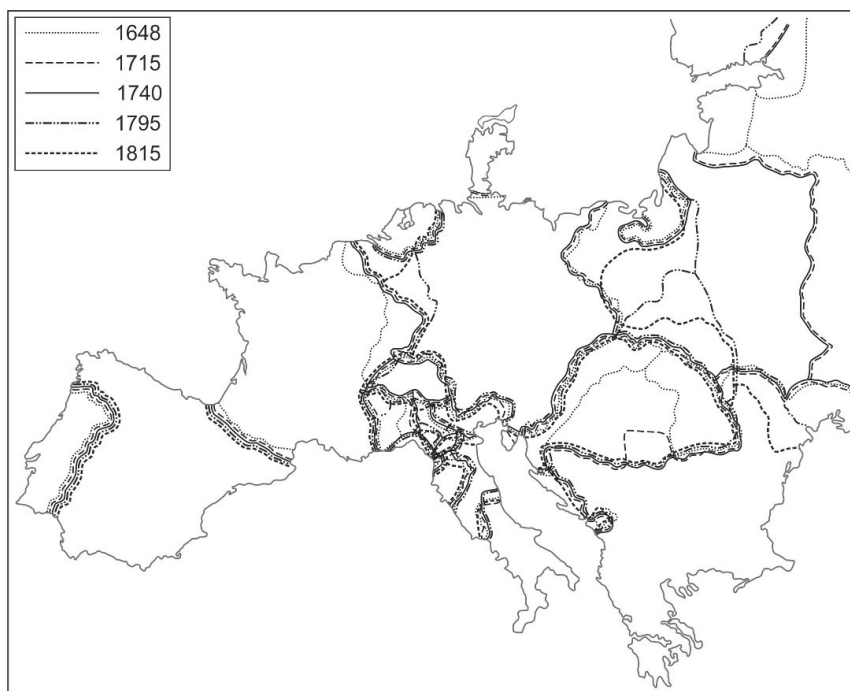


Fig. 2. The evolution of Central European and Hungarian state borders, 1648–1816

Source: A. Halász (1936).

Hungary was integrated into the Habsburg Empire in the 18th century (becoming a *de jure* hereditary Habsburg Kingdom through male/female lineage), while Poland fell victim to adjacent great powers (Habsburg Empire, Russian Empire, Kingdom of Prussia). Both of these nations, boasting their long historical past, unique European position and independence, resisted oppression through uprisings.

The summary figure of Halász's maps (Fig. 3) on the period between 1878 and 1935 present the main features of the great Balkan and post-World War I reorganisations. Whilst omitting certain elements of the transformations, it clearly indicates the direction of the processes.

In a peculiar way, Poland became the key subject of Hungarian historical and political geographical analyses under World War I. Aurél Hézser (Hézser 1915), in his discussion of Russian Poland, presented the historical-territorial transformations of Poland: Great Poland (1634), "small Polands" (1807–1809 Grand Duchy of Warsaw, 1815–1830 Polish Kingdom, and "Divided Poland", 1772, 1793, 1795). Besides sympathy towards the Poles, Hézser also attributed great significance to neighbourhood relations with the major powers which in his view, cemented the community of destiny of Hungary and Poland.

Under World War I, Ödön Vécsey interrogated the role of “geographical foundations” in shaping the historical fate of Poland (Vécsey 1917). According to Vécsey, Poland was a target of German and Russian power ambitions in the natural geographical and political space alike. In the case of Poland, it was not geographical specifics but power ambitions that shaped territorial processes. The Hungarian-Polish neighbourhood and the common border were not laden with conflicts, though.

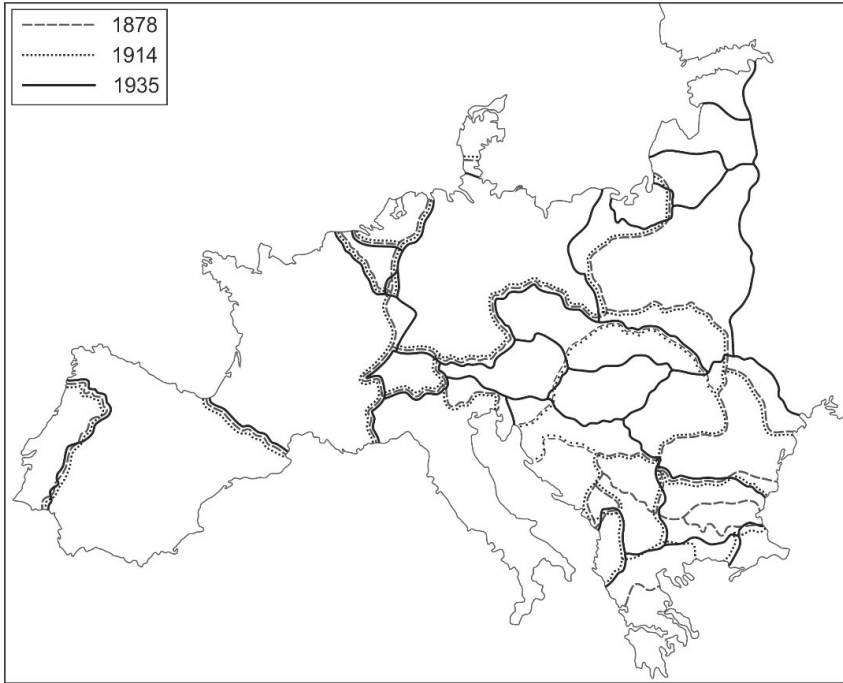


Fig. 3. The evolution of Central European and Hungarian state borders, 1878–1935

Source: A. Halász (1936).

András Rónai, whose research targeted territorial and border changes, analysed various aspects of the stability of given state border sections. Basically, he was studying very long-term processes (Fig. 4) just like Albert Halász, however, his main interest was not in providing a snapshot of the conditions of a particular period of time. Instead, he used generalised figures to illustrate the state territorial and border dynamics specific to the area.

Through the example of “emblematic countries”, Rónai illustrated how general European processes affected particular countries in diverse ways. Hungary and Poland were both included in his comparative research. Whilst he demonstrated the existence of certain similarities between the two countries, he showed that divergencies and discontinuous development paths were more the norm.

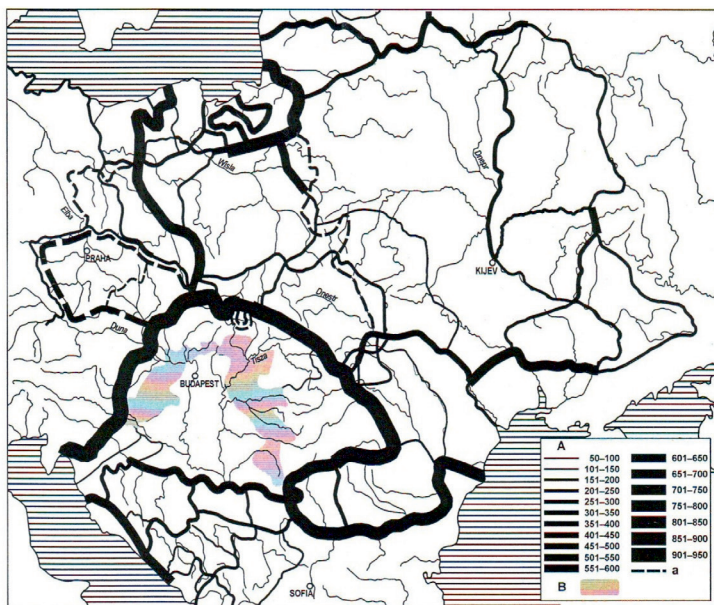


Fig. 4. The stability of Central European state borders, 800–1920
Source: A. Rónai, ed. (1945).

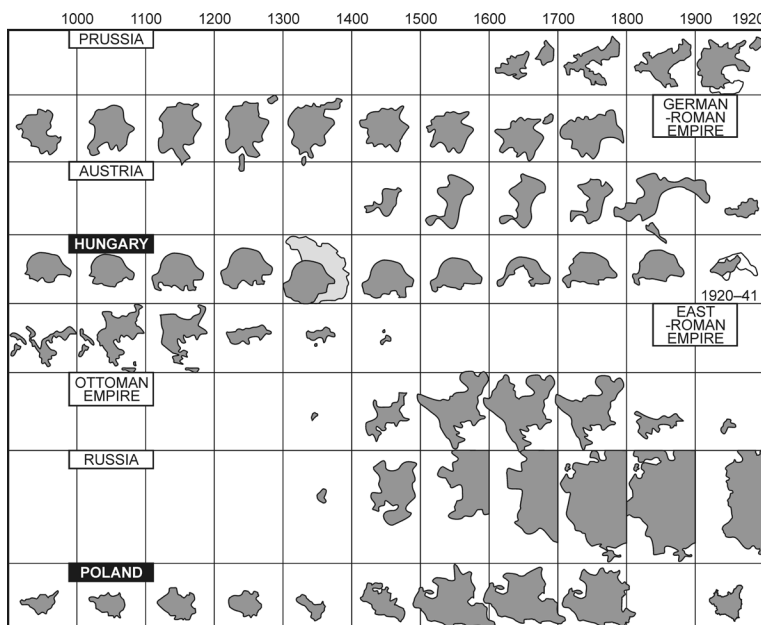


Fig. 5. The spatial biographies of diverse European states, 800–1920
Source: A. Rónai, ed. (1945).

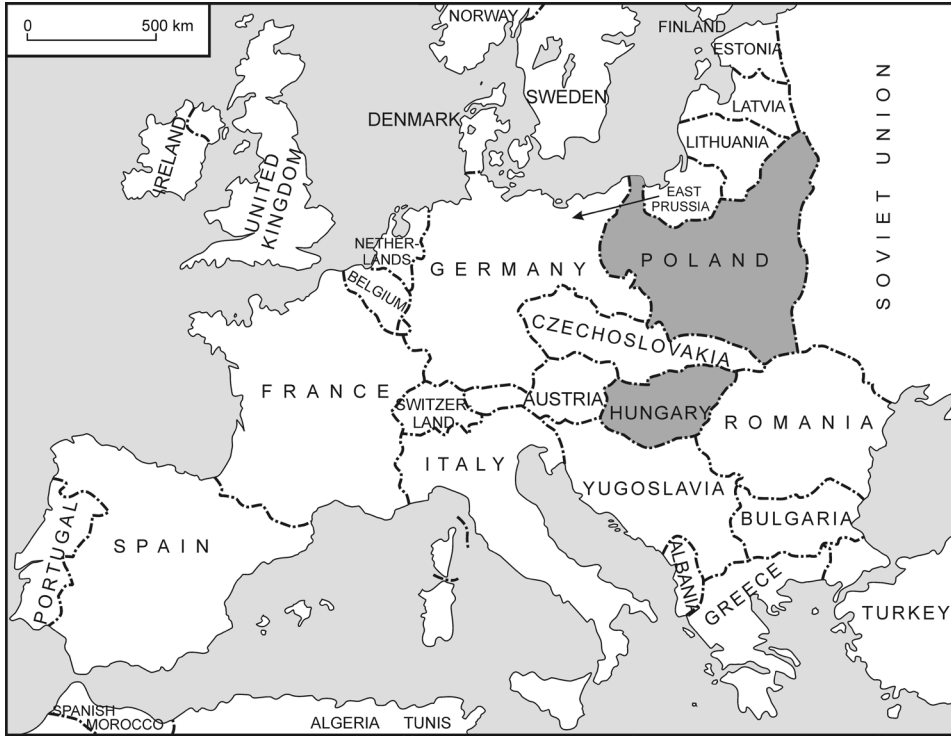


Fig. 6. The neighbourhood environment of “Greater Poland and Smaller Hungary” in Europe, 1920

Source: Central Statistical Office of Hungary.

The Paris Peace Treaties of 1919 that concluded World War I turned Europe upside down, creating a new situation for Poland and Hungary becoming second neighbours. Poland, emerging victorious from the war, was among the signatories of the Hungarian Peace Treaty and procured some smaller territories from historical Hungary, yet this didn't prevent interwar Hungarian geography from “exempting it from blame”.

The short period between autumn 1938 and 1939 saw the destinies of the two countries – regaining a common border – merge once more. Both countries silently assisted the division of Czechoslovakia and, later on, with the independence of Slovakia and its truncation by Hungary (or the liberation of Subcarpathia in March 1939 from the Hungarian perspective) they became neighbours once more. The shared Carpathian border (301 km) gained outstanding significance in September 1939 with tens of thousands of Poles fleeing German and Soviet occupation (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Common Hungarian Polish borders from April of 1939 until September of 1939
Source: Földrajzi Zsebkönyv (1940).

András Rónai (Rónai 1947) was still able to register post-World War II territorial and state border changes and present the new political geographical position of the new Poland (becoming a second neighbour to Hungary once more) and its significance before the complete banning of political geographical research in Hungary in 1948.

Summary

The short overview of European, Central European, Hungarian and Polish state building and state border changes (which for reasons of space could not go into details) indicates and (partially) documents the extremely problematic historical and geographical questions inherent in the development of Central European political space. The “European problem” and, more specifically, the “Central European knot” were constantly recurring elements against the backdrop of changing power configurations.

Immediate neighbourhood relations and common borders raised bilateral and multilateral issues at the same time. Throughout history, Hungarian-Polish relations were characterised by peaceful co-existence with minor territorial conflicts along and across shared borders that cast a shadow on their mutual relations only at earlier periods.

The two countries' external relationships share common features due to their neighbourhood relations with one or several great powers in the course of their historical evolution. They were equally subjected to the imperialist ambitions of major powers.

Post-World War I, the two countries embarked on diverging development paths: Poland recovered its greatness, while Hungary emerged "truncated" from the world cataclysm in terms of both territory and population.

The territory of Poland was divided between Germany and the Soviets at the beginning of World War II and was subjected to German rule from the summer of 1941. Hungary was also occupied by Germany from March 19, 1944. In spring 1945, both countries became Soviet-liberated/occupied zones, Poland as victor, and Hungary as a defeated ally.

The special significance of the figures constructed by Albert Halász depicting state geographies, the history of states and state borders lies not only in their contribution to the history of science, they have also raised a whole host of methodological issues. His research presents the bulk share of spatial historical processes – in a non-comprehensive, sometimes questionable manner. Nonetheless, I highly recommend studying the (theoretical and methodological) issues raised by Halász since YouTube and other "neatly moving" European flowcharts depict the very same processes. Lucky are those European nations – and how few – whose citizens are familiar with the long-term evolution of their state territory and may notice how slight the changes between the "now" and the "then" are in reality.

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Historyczna i polityczno-geograficzna analiza węgiersko-polskich granic sprzed 1939 roku w węgierskiej geografii historycznej

Zarys treści: Historia rozwoju wspólnych granic Polski i Węgier zaczęła się zasadniczo wraz z ustanowieniem obu tych państw. Od tego czasu terytoria i granice obu państw znacznie się zmieniły, jednak w okresach Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów wspólne granice zawsze wykazywały wysoki stopień stabilności.

Pierwszy opis wspólnych granic państwowych znajdujemy u Galla Anonima (około 1200 r.). Od XV wieku parlament węgierski, na mocy aktów prawnych, kilkakrotnie ustanawiał różne komisje do wytyczenia granic z krajami ościennymi, a zatem także z Polską. Komisje te wyznaczały granice i dokonywały ich korekt.

W wyniku trzykrotnego zaniku państwowości polskiej, ustanowiona treść umów o wspólnych granicach uległa zasadniczej zmianie. Po pierwszej wojnie światowej wspólna granica pomiędzy oboma państwami, czyli odradzającą się Polską i historycznymi Węgrami całkowicie zniknęła, gdyż Węgry utraciły około dwóch trzecich swojego terytorium państwowego.

W przededniu II wojny światowej przywrócono na krótko wspólną granicę, przez którą po wrześniu 1939 roku tysiące Polaków uciekło na Węgry.

Ta częściowo wspólna dla obu państw historia pojawiającej się i zanikającej granicy polsko-węgierskiej stanowi swoisty międzynarodowy ewenement.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, Węgry, granice.

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