



# History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

‘DEAR ESTATES AND ORDERS,

I MAY NOT BE A GREAT MAN,  
BUT I AM A WEALTHY ONE; THUS, FOR  
THE AUGMENTATION OF MY NATIONAL  
LANGUAGE, I BESTOW ONE WHOLE YEAR  
OF MY INCOME IN SUCH A WAY THAT ITS  
DEVOTION TO AN END AND ITS ORDER  
SHOULD DEPEND ON THE NATIONAL  
ASSEMBLY AT ALL TIMES’.



## FOUNDATION AND THE CREATION OF FRAMEWORKS (1825-1830)

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From the end of the 18th century, plans for an institution uniting Hungarian cultivators of science and literature emerged on several occasions. In an authoritarian society of orders, however, intellectual initiatives found no support for a long time until some members of the social élite began to espouse the matter. On 3 November 1825, during the session of the Pozsony (Bratislava) National Assembly, Pál Felsőbüki Nagy, leading figure of the feudal opposition, inveighed against magnates showing a vicious indifference towards the matter of national culture and vernacular. In response, a young count in the audience, Hungarian cavalry captain István Széchenyi, made the afore-cited offer.

Reactions to his speech suggest that the foundation may have been the harmonised act of several participants. Following suit, György Károlyi, György Andrassy, Ábrahám Vay and others made their offers, as well. In 1826 Count József Teleki's donation of his 30,000-volume library of great value laid the foundation for the Library of the Academy.

The foundation of the Hungarian Learned Society was codified by the National Assembly: Decree XI of 1827 was titled 'On the Establishment of a Learned Society or Hungarian Academy for the Cultivation of the Hungarian Language'. The institution, officially called the Hungarian Academy of Sciences after 1845, began operating in 1830 after the establishment and the royal assent of the basic rules. The first president of the Academy was Count József Teleki, a historian, with Count István Széchenyi acting as Vice President. In the first fifty years

the secretarial post was occupied by Gábor Döbrentei, Ferenc Toldy, László Szalay and János Arany.

## UNIFIED ORTHOGRAPHY: THE REFORM ERA (1831-1848)

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The first achievements of the new institution were the unification of Hungarian orthography and the documenting of Hungarian grammar; it published the first handbook of spelling rules (1832), the first book of descriptive grammar (1846) and the first dictionary (1862).

The Hungarian Learned Society soon became the key organiser of intellectual life: its six classes as they are known (Linguistics, Philosophy, History, Mathematics, Legal Science and Natural Science) called for applications and published books in several scientific fields and even paid its members. Its journal, *Tudománytár* (Treasury of Knowledge), made foreign scientific achievements available in Hungarian. Small assemblies, and from the mid-1840s, section summits, provided a forum for the presentation of individual scientific achievements and new literary works.

## TIGHT CONTROL AND FINANCIAL GROWTH (1849-1967)

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Most academicians were also renowned public figures, consequently in the 1840s the government considered their association as an ally to the liberal-reformer opposition. This was partly the reason why, after the failure of the War of Independence of 1848-49, the autonomy of the Academy was significantly restricted and its mere operation was tied to the modification of its basic stat-

utes. This modification which served to strengthen government control took place in 1858.

A revival at the end of the decade was marked by Baron Simon Sina's donation of 80,000 forints, followed by a nationwide collection for the building of the headquarters of the Academy. The Neo-Renaissance palace was based on the plans of Friedrich August Stühler; its construction was led by Miklós Ybl and Antal Skalnitzky and it was opened on 11 December 1865. The council rooms, the library and reading hall and the art collection greatly contributed to the bettering of scientific work.

## HUNGARIAN SCIENCE DURING THE MONARCHY (1867-1918)

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The all-encompassing rights to home rule regained during the so called Compromise of 1867 provided more advantageous conditions for the Academy: for the first time during its history it received a state subsidy. The structure of the body was changed: the six classes were replaced by three: Linguistics and Aesthetics; Philosophy, Social and Historical Sciences; and Mathematics and Natural Sciences. Along with the strengthening of the Hungarian scientific sphere, the Academy developed multilateral relations with the international scientific community and was a founding member of the International Association of Academies in 1900. Although the various figures of the scientific community were held together by the Academy during the years of Dualism, the Academy was able to act as an initiator mainly in the field of social sciences. From the turn of the century, the Academy received more and more criticism for turning away from topical issues and not without reason.

This, however, did not have any major effect on public opinion regarding the status of the institution. The fact that all of its presidents throughout the decades of Dualism (József Eötvös, Menyhért Lónyay, Ágoston Trefort, Loránd Eötvös, Albert Berzeviczy) also held a ministerial position was a sign of prestige as well.

## REVOLUTION AND PROLETARIAN DICTATORSHIP (1918-1919)

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The bourgeois democratic government established after the revolution of October 1918 did not in effect deal with the Academy. However, this very much changed during the next government's reign which entered of-

fice in March 1919: the leaders of the Hungarian Soviet Republic were suspicious about anything national and conservative and probably viewed the Academy as an anachronistic institution. In its decree of 14 April, the People's Commissariat for Public Education suspended the Academy's operation, promising reorganisation as soon as possible. This, however, never happened and after the fall of the proletarian dictatorship, the Academy continued on the same path it had been on in the previous years.

## THE HORTHY ERA (1920-1944)

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Following the war and revolutions, the Academy's work restarted with a lot of difficulty as war inflation had consumed many of its assets. After the Treaty of Trianon came into effect the institution was supported with regular state subsidies administered by Count Kunó Klebelsberg, Minister for Education, who planned to provide pivotal roles for culture and science in the reconstruction of the country. The Academy did not regain its financial stability until the late 1920s when Count Ferenc Vigyázó left his entire estate to it. From this point on the yearly income of 500-600 thousand pengős from the Vigyázó legacy was spent on scientific purposes.

Between the two world wars, the Academy was characterised by a peculiar duality. Its spirituality and its leaders stubbornly stuck to the conservatism of the late 19th century. At the same time internationally renowned natural scientists became members of the Academy, including biochemist Albert Szent-Györgyi (the first Hungarian Nobel Prize Winner), mechanical engineer Kálmán Kandó and chemist Géza Zemplén.

## ON THE BRINK OF DISSOLUTION (1945-1948)

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After World War II, the 120-year-old institution was on the brink of dissolution in many ways. Once again, work became impossible for financial reasons: its estates were divided up and redistributed; its money and stocks evaporated during the hyperinflation; and its apartment blocks were nationalised. At the same time leaders of the institution were conscious of the imminent danger presented by at first the Hungarian Communist Party and later the Hungarian Workers' Party.

Part of the membership were in revolt, too: led by Albert Szent-Györgyi and Zoltán Bay, those aiming at true reforms established the Academy of Natural Science in

the summer of 1945. Following a fierce debate, a compromise was reached in 1946: the Academy admitted the members of the Academy of Natural Science and its structure, unchanged since 1891, was reorganised. With the first two classes remaining untouched, the third became that of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Technical Sciences and, in addition, a fourth department was established for Biological and Medical Sciences.

## A BODY OF SCIENTISTS OR AN ORGAN OF GOVERNMENT? THE SOCIALIST ERA (1948-1989)

The possibility of dissolution became a political threat in 1948 when, with the intent of creating 'the highest controlling organ of Hungarian science', the Hungarian Workers' Party set up the Hungarian Scientific Council, operating as a ministry for science in opposition to the Academy. Law XXVII of 1949 turned the body of scientists into a Soviet-style academy, merging the Academy and the Hungarian Scientific Council. Thus, the Academy acquired a role within state power: its new responsibilities included the elaboration of a nationwide scientific strategy, securing the recruitment of young scientists, supervision of scientific societies and the managing of publishing scientific journals and books. The structure of the Academy was also reformed in the spirit of 'democratic centralism'. Resolutions were made by the Presidium rather than the General Assembly, with the affairs of departments also controlled by the Presidium. With the new basic ruling, the sub-class of Fine Arts was eliminated, excluding all artists from the Academy, while the majority of earlier members were declared to be 'conferring' members.

The number of departments or sections as they are known gradually grew to ten, then, by separating Mathematics and Physics, to eleven, with a greater and greater ratio of natural sciences. The network of Academy research institutes was established in the 1950s and 1960s. The Academy contributed to the advancement of Hun-

garian science through the work of thousands of scientists working in its research institutes.

Decree 41 of 1969, issued by the Presidential Committee of the Hungarian People's Republic, mandated dual leadership for the Academy. The president, as the leader of the scientific body, was still elected by the General Assembly, whereas the secretary-general, the head of the technical organ, was from then on appointed by the government. Thus, the organization of the Academy was split into two.

## AFTER THE FALL OF THE SOCIALIST REGIME (1990- )

At the end of the 1980s the Academy saw a new reform movement. Yet even before the political changes occurred, the General Assembly in 1989 had rehabilitated academicians excluded from the Academy in 1949. In 1992 the Széchenyi Academy of Letters and Arts was founded as an associate but independent institution.

An essential change in the Academy's structure was brought about by Law XL of 1994, which defined the legal status of the Academy as 'a public body working as a legal personality on a principle of self-government' and extended public body membership to all holding a scientific degree. The main organ of the scientific public body is the General Assembly of academic members and 200 elected members of the public body. According to current academic regulations, the Academy's full-time leaders are the President, the Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretary-General. They are elected every three years from among Hungarian academicians.

The eleven scientific sections of the Academy operate a number of scientific committees working in collaboration with the research institutes. The Doctoral Council may award the title 'Doctor of the Academy' to the most prominent scientists. Financial conditions of operation are secured partly by the central budget and partly by Hungarian and international grants.

