

Ungváry, Krisztián: *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege. Diszkrimináció, szociálpolitika és antiszemitizmus Magyarországon*. Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó 2012. ISBN: 978-9636-76522-4; 653 S.

Rezensiert von: Ferenc Laczó, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Imre Kertész Kolleg

Back in 2008, Hungarian Holocaust historiography's topical priorities and interpretations as well as its international standing were subjected to a severe critique that triggered a prolonged debate.¹ The new Hungarian-language book of Krisztián Ungváry has not only been in the making for an entire decade but closely follows some current trends of Holocaust research, even if it does not provide an overview of relevant international historiography and its primary stakes also rather concern questions of Hungarian anti-Semitism and responsibility.²

The seventeen chapters of the book map the local prehistory of the Hungarian Holocaust, consistently challenging the apologetic aim of externalizing Hungarian guilt.³ While the central topic of the book is the cumulative radicalisation of Hungarian anti-Semitism, it does not ambition to offer a history of the Hungarian Holocaust; several crucial aspects of the genocide of 1944–45 are missing from it. What the book does explore in detail is how radicalising discrimination resulted from parallel acts of various ideologically committed and materially involved agencies, including several ministries, different layers of the administration, various chambers as well as newly founded organizations such as The Government Agency for Unemployed Intellectuals. It provides a plethora of evidence on the wide support programs of a „new social balance“, Jewish dissimulation and eventually even „de-Judaisation“ enjoyed during the reign of Miklós Horthy. Ungváry also attempts to prove that a significant part of anti-Jewish measures were initiated at lower levels and many local actors implemented centrally taken decisions in more severe manners than required.

Ungváry emphasizes that „the intention to make gestures to the Germans or more serious German attempts at exerting influence“ cannot be demonstrated until 1942 (p. 187).

Moreover, he explains that numerous Hungarian bodies formulated plans to expel Jews prior to 1944 – even though his chapter on deportation plans, one of the shortest ones of the book, does not provide much evidence in this regard (p. 503). At the same time, he contests the notion that Nazi Germany occupied Hungary in March 1944 with detailed plans of deporting and subsequently exterminating Hungarian Jewry. He maintains that Hungarian perpetrators voluntarily overperformed. It „might be risked“, he writes, that „Hungarian authorities exceeded their previous organizational and efficiency levels when robbing Jewish wealth“ (p. 574). Ungváry thus not only highlights the eminent role of Hungarian perpetrators in having created the preconditions for the Hungarian Holocaust, but asserts that their responsibility for its implementation was also decisive. It is indeed difficult to imagine a sharper contestation of apologetic assessments of the Hungarian role in the Holocaust.

Besides presenting the perpetrator side, including the material involvement and corruption of large segments of society, Ungváry also ambitions the social historical contextualization of Hungarian anti-Semitism. One of his central claims in this regard is that modernizing social policies and discriminatory intentions were deeply intertwined. Ungváry goes as far as to call anti-Semitism the most important social policy of the regime. He reveals that the connection between reformist policies and racist exclusion was especially strong in the case of Prime Ministers Béla Imrédy and Pál Teleki. According to Ungváry, anti-Semitism thus belonged to the central components of Hungarian social policy in the years

¹See Gábor Gyáni, *Helyünk a holokauszt történetírásában*, in: *Kommentár*, 2008/3, S. 13-23. Gyáni's theses were contested by several authors. For the most elaborate rebuttal, see László Karsai, *A magyar holokauszt-történetírásról*, in: *Kommentár*, 2008/6, S. 91-104.

²Ungváry names the works of Götz Aly, Christian Gerlach and Ernst Nolte as his most important sources of inspiration (p. 613). On Hungary specifically, see Götz Aly/Christian Gerlach, *Das letzte Kapitel. Realpolitik, Ideologie und der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944/45*, Stuttgart 2002.

³Such externalization attempts are analyzed in Regina Fritz, *Nach Krieg und Judenmord. Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944*, Göttingen 2012.

prior to 1944. Unfortunately he fails to paint a comprehensive picture of the functioning of the Hungarian state in these years. Moreover, his innovative analysis of the late 1930s is not accompanied by a similarly thorough interpretation of the early 1940s when Hungary was already at war.

One of the central conclusions the book offers is that the seemingly positive aspects of the regime's policies were deeply intertwined with its gravest crime. The monograph thus paints a dark picture of the „Horthy-system“ mentioned in its title (let me note that the expression is far from consensually accepted). The interpretation that condemned the regime that ruled between 1919 and late 1944 as fascist lost its prestige decades ago. In more recent decades, mainstream Hungarian historiography has devoted less than consistent attention to the anti-Semitism of the period. In this historiographical context, „The Balance Sheet of the Horthy-System“ is all the more significant since it convincingly shows the exceptional importance of anti-Semitism during the period without meaning to restore outdated political ideological clichés.

On the other hand, Ungváry largely neglects the importance of transnational frames, connections and models and shows no ambition to place Hungary in a comparative context. Ungváry's work represents a newer trend in Holocaust historiography that emphasizes the eminent responsibility of local actors and the shocking enthusiasm of perpetrators on the lower levels of power hierarchies. Had he also linked his findings to this stream of international scholarship, it would have allowed him to argue that Hungarian perpetrators were primarily responsible for the exclusion, ghettoization and deportation of Hungarian Jews even though they did not invent the last steps to genocide in 1944. Unfortunately, he elaborates these themes in a national frame and at times seems to overestimate local innovativeness. In other words, this is a prehistory of the Hungarian Holocaust in which Nazi Germany and all other neighboring countries of Hungary hardly play any role.

The book devotes some attention to mapping the discursive bases of anti-Semitism but it is primarily interested in its material

background and consequences.⁴ According to Ungváry's interpretation, Hungarian Jewry was simultaneously characterized by its economic might and political vulnerability and this played a central role in the unfolding of radical racially-based social policy. It is undoubtedly true that in the case of Hungary material factors played a seminal role in the history of the ever more radical deprivation of rights. On the other hand, social and economic historical specificities cannot account for the anti-Semitic supposition that „Hungariandom“ (magyarság) and „Jewry“ (zsidóság) were in fierce opposition and that the circumstances of „Hungarians“ were to be improved at the expense of „Jews.“ Anti-Semitism might be seen as a means in the fight against the harmful consequences of modernity or, as Ungváry does, as an awfully distorted path of modernization. But can this conception account for the emergence as well as the devastating dynamism of anti-Semitism?

Comparative reflections might have slightly altered the conclusions reached here too. Due to the economic position of Hungarian Jewry, the relative value of what was expropriated during the process of robbing them might have exceeded those in practically every other European country. This local specificity might indeed have significantly contributed to the radicalization of local processes but, as the continent-wide history of the Holocaust shows, it did not cause such radicalization alone.

Beyond covering all these aspects, Ungváry also offers an interpretation of the development of Hungarian history in the 20th century across the epochal divide of 1945. As part of his search for trends across this divide, the author makes repeated remarks on anti-German attitudes as well as on the expulsion of Germans after the war. He also argues that significant tools of a planned economy were already applied during peacetime, even if state discrimination became more encompassing in the late 1940s (p. 195). He ultimately maintains that „the practices of an om-

⁴The topic and some of the argument of the book are similar to Gábor Kádár/Zoltán Vági, *Hullarablás. A magyar zsidóság gazdasági megsemmisítése*, Budapest 2005.

nipotent state gained the upper hand“ in the economic life of the country „between 1939 and 1941“ (p. 398).

In sum, Ungváry analyzes 20th century state criminality without observing society merely from above. One of the main lessons the book offers is that the interventionist and increasingly „omnipotent“ state was not forced on the population by a select few but its establishment had numerous active participants. As totalitarian theory can hardly allow for the decentralized working of power in society, the abundant empirical evidence of how cumulative radicalization followed and the narrative of the rise of the omnipotent state are somewhat at odds though.

Scholarly publications of this importance also function as interventions in Hungarian memory politics. Nevertheless, there seems to be some tension between mapping the primarily structurally determined road toward the Hungarian Holocaust and posing the question of responsibility. A sharp moral critique of intentions can hardly fit smoothly into a primarily structural explanation of socioeconomic developments. Even so, the monograph is a highly significant addition to our understanding of Hungarian anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews and, more generally, of Hungarian ethnicism and radical state discrimination. It formulates a sharp and timely Hungarian self-critique, even if without integrating the case of Hungary into larger European patterns.

HistLit 2013-3-007 / Ferenc Laczó über Ungváry, Krisztián: *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege. Diszkrimináció, szociálpolitika és antiszemitizmus Magyarországon*. Pécs 2012, in: H-Soz-Kult 02.07.2013.