H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

GyÖ¶rgy RÖ©ti. *Hungarian-Italian Relations in the Shadow of Hitler's Germany, 1933-1940.* Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 2003. 346 pp. $52.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-523-2.

Reviewed by Bruce Strang (Department of History, Lakehead University)

Published on H-Diplo (November, 2007)

The Cost of Translation

Gyorgy Reti's monograph is an interesting and useful addition to the literature on 1930s foreign affairs. This translation makes the work, first published in 1998, available to English language scholars. Reti's careful scholarship offers new insights and new evidence on Hungarian policy, and given the language barrier for non-Magyar historians, an English translation is very welcome. Reti presents a thoughtful argument rooted in solid archival research. Unfortunately, several flaws mar its finish.

Reti, not surprisingly for a retired diplomat, is a historian of the old school. He covers the high politics between statesmen and the discussions among foreign policymakers. The chronological narrative details Italo-Hungarian relations exhaustively, describing the meetings between leaders and the changes in their policies. It begins with Adolf Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 and ends with Hungary's accession to the tripartite Italo-German-Japanese Pact in 1940. Reti argues that successive Hungarian leaders turned toward Italy as the best available sponsor of Hungarian revisionism as they sought to remove the onerous conditions imposed through the Trianon Treaty and to restore lost Hungarian power and territory. Reti covers such events as the 1934 Rome Protocols linking Italy, Hungary, and Austria; the founding of the Rome-Berlin Axis and its effects on relations with Hungary; the 1938 Czechoslovak crises; the resulting Vienna Award; and the Pact of Steel; as well as the events leading to the outbreak of war and Hungary's increasingly close yet problematic relationship with Germany. Along the way one sees the rise and fall of various Hungarian administrations and foreign ministers. In spite of the resistance of both Hungarian and Italian leaders to German domination, neither country proved sufficiently adept or powerful to prevent its eclipse by the resurgent Nazi state. Reti ultimately argues that the dramatic rise of German economic, political, and military power allowed it to draw both Italy and Hungary inevitably into the German orbit and that Germany largely marginalized Italy's role in the Danube basin. This conclusion is neither daring nor particularly new, but it is largely sound.

Reti's major accomplishments lie in his research and the detailed description of the contents of the documents. This book presents the best research to date on

the Hungarian side of the relationship, a welcome addition given the language barrier for most English language academics and students. Reti has used both Hungarian and Italian archival sources and buttresses these with available published sources, such as *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* and *Documents on German Foreign Policy*. He consciously included extensive quotations, arguing that they convey both the diplomatic style of the period and provide the best quality of information for readers. This approach, combined with the close comparison of Italian and Hungarian points of view, makes for a demanding read, especially for undergraduates. It also provides large amounts of new information and evidence, particularly of Hungarian aims and decision making. Those who persevere through the dense language will find a useful reward.

Several problems lessen the book's value. The lack of a bibliography and a list of abbreviations, and often the failure to indicate the full text that abbreviations identify, will annoy scholars seeking to use the endnotes and to follow Reti's sources. The book also has several minor historical errors, such as misdating the Locarno Treaty in 1924. One expects more from a monograph distributed by a university press.

I would not normally discuss grammar in a book review, but the poor quality of the translation requires comment. I suspect that the translators aimed to keep the wording as close as possible to the original Magyar, but the resulting text is problematic. It is replete with basic grammatical errors: possessives-plurals mistakes, needless commas between subject and predicate (I once counted six in half a page), mangled verb tenses, tortuous transitions, and frequent misspellings of Italian words. I found myself comparing this book not entirely favorably to middling-level undergraduate essays–surely a telling criticism. Reti's text deserved a better translation.

On a deeper plane, Reti's contentions about Italian policy are not always entirely accurate. For example, he talks about Benito Mussolini's sanguine reaction to the Anschluss (pp.112-113). It is true that Mussolini and Galeazzo Ciano tried to put a good public face on the Anschluss in order to minimize their humiliation, but their public support for Germany and their bravado did not hide their disquiet that Hitler had so rapidly destroyed Austria's independence. More seriously, Reti is mistaken when he contends that "an agreement in principle was reached at the Berlin meeting by the two fascist powers about the division of Europe into spheres of influence" (p. 89). Available evidence does not stretch nearly so far, and the continuing German-Italian competition in the Balkans suggests that neither country's leaders believed that they had struck any such bargain. These mistaken readings of evidence dealing with Italy indicate that Reti is on surer ground dealing with Hungarian rather than Italian policy, not surprisingly given his deeper research in Hungarian archives.

The biggest difficulty with Reti's monograph is that his concentration on high politics has created a book curiously devoid of context. The introduction, for example, indicates that Hungary lost large amounts of territory and population as a result of Trianon. Reti, however, seemingly assumes that his readers will know the full extent of the losses and the ultimate disposition of the severed lands and people. While experts may know this information, most undergraduate and graduate students will not. The lack of context, unless the reader has this knowledge immediately at hand, compromises Reti's subsequent discussion of the issue. How, precisely, did Trianon affect Hungary's relations with Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania, not to mention Bulgaria, Italy, and Germany? Reti is largely silent on these issues, apparently expecting that his readers will simply infer the fundamental relationships. Reti is equally obscure about military matters. He states that the Hungarian military was weak, but does not explain the state of affairs. How big was Hungary's post-Trianon military? How did it change over time? How powerful was Rumania or Czechoslovakia? During the Czechoslovak crisis in September and October 1938, what was the military balance, and how did the military balance between Italy and Germany change over time? On these questions Reti is silent, but these issues obviously constrained the choices that Hungarian leaders made. Similarly, Reti does little to explain the ideological framework of various Hungarian leaders, the political landscape in which they operated, and the economic and trade constraints that conditioned their policies. Since the 1960s, these approaches have become *de rigueur* for formerly old-fashioned diplomatic historians, and the lack of context in this book sounds a jarring note. Reti ultimately concludes that Germany inevitably pulled Hungary and Italy into its orbit, but that assessment largely ignores that Italian and Hungarian leaders made choices among competing alternatives. If Reti wanted readers to accept his thesis of inevitably, then he would have had to argue that structural constraints compelled the pursuit of Hungarian revisionism and expansionism. He has signally failed to demonstrate this point and has not even made a genuine attempt to do so. This conceptual

weakness blunts the force of his conclusion. In essence, Reti's approach is anachronistic, and a fresher approach to the subject incorporating evidence of ideologies and economic, military, and political structures would provide a more compelling argument.

However warranted these criticisms may be, taken together they read too harshly. In spite of its flaws, Reti's book is a welcome addition to the literature, as it makes previously inaccessible evidence available to English language scholars, and it deepens our understanding of the relationships among Hungary, Italy, and Germany. It also shows the value of multi-archival research and the importance of the history and politics of Southeastern Europe to scholars too long used to concentrating on the actions of the Great Powers.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Bruce Strang. Review of RÖ©ti, GyÖ¶rgy, *Hungarian-Italian Relations in the Shadow of Hitler's Germany, 1933-1940*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13827

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.