



Mária Ormos. *Hungary in the Age of the Two World Wars 1914-1945.* Boulder: Eastern European Monographs, 2007. 450 S. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-621-5.

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Exploring Interwar Hungary

The history of Hungary during the period covered by this book is one that Hungarians find both deeply traumatic and profoundly controversial. The legacies of the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon have shaped modern Hungarian political culture, and the question of responsibility for Hungary's "total defeat" in the Second World War as well as for the persecution and murder of its Jewish population has been profoundly contested. Historical interpretation of the period has often developed in the shadow of political trends. The Cold War-era dictatorship cast the interwar and wartime regimes as "counter-revolutionary" if not openly "fascist." Since 1989, some contributors to the debates over the period have sought, in an over-reaction to official views of the past promoted by the socialist regime, to rehabilitate the political system of the interwar years. In light of these debates, the translation and publication in English of Mária Ormos's survey of the political and military, and to a lesser extent the social and economic, history of Hungary in the interwar period is especially welcome. Since C.A. Macartney's flawed masterpiece on the political history of the Horthy era, the second edition of which is now almost fifty years old, no scholar has attempted a comprehensive survey of the period in English.[1]

Ormos, one of Hungary's most prominent historians of politics and international relations in this period, is especially well qualified both to survey domestic political developments and, most importantly for the non-Hungarian reader, to situate them in their broader European context. Her survey, even though written initially for a Hungarian audience, succeeds in doing this. She has

provided a clear, well-written account of political change between 1914 and 1945 that makes the complex material comprehensible, even for readers for whom it may be unfamiliar. She has ably synthesized the available Hungarian literature and has, in an extensive appendix, provided a number of key documents from the period.

The work's strength lies in its treatment of links between the realm of domestic high politics and international relations. Like most mainstream interpreters in Hungary, she presents a picture in which the country's room for maneuvering was circumscribed severely by the international context in which it operated. This was true of the period following the First World War, when military pressure forced Hungary to accept the treaty. It was also, she maintains, true of the period leading up to the Second World War, when Hungary found itself increasingly constrained by a more powerful National Socialist Germany. She gives more credit—at least than those accounts in the West—to some Hungarian domestic political actors. István Bethlen is seen as having successfully consolidated the political system and achieved a measure of stability after the exceptional period of chaos, trauma, and collapse that followed the end of the First World War. Hungary's Regent, Miklós Horthy, is presented as having to master an ever more impossible set of circumstances, especially as the Second World War progressed.

Though Ormos does not ignore the difficult questions that stem from a study of this period—most notably, the embrace of antisemitic legislation by the Hungarian political elite from 1938 onward, and the considerable sup-

port within Hungarian society for the politics of the radical Right during this period—her focus on the political and diplomatic means that she is ill-equipped to meet these challenges adequately. While she does not ignore the social, economic, or cultural history of the period, she attempts to describe, rather than analyze, the dynamics of Hungarian society. Furthermore, her account of these dynamics is weak in situations where the secondary literature available to support it is still sketchy. This problem becomes apparent in her discussion of the “economy and society in the period of territorial revision and war,” where she makes questionable judgments that I assume represent the lack of good secondary literature on the social history of Hungary’s home front. She states, for example, that “the war was felt little in Hungary before 1941” (p. 372)—a conclusion which I found surprising. While reading this book, I was working in an archive in western Transdanubia on sources relating to everyday life during this period. Conscription of male members of poor households, or those of artisans, which became widespread during the autumn of 1939, caused real hardship and complaint on a scale that forced village authorities to expand, even given limited means, the scope of compensation they gave to families left behind. Severe inflation in 1940 caused considerable problems for the poor; supplies of fat for the landless in the villages dried up, as did supplies of heating oil during the winter of 1940-1.

The book’s larger approach, furthermore, does not allow Ormos to explore adequately the links between politics and society, which seem fundamental to explaining some of the political changes of the period. While political culture has been the focus of recent innovative work on interwar Hungary,[2] this issue is largely absent from Ormos’s account, which is surprising given her recent publication of a fascinating monograph on intellectual responses to the Great Depression in Hungary that is revealing about political culture.[3] Furthermore, her inability to link society and politics lies behind her failure to understand the shift towards more radical and antisemitic politics during the second half of the 1930s. She clearly underestimates the breadth of support that national-socialist movements, especially the Arrow Cross, gained among industrial workers, agricultural la-

borers, and smallholders during 1938 and 1939. In her discussion of the far Right, she draws too sharp a distinction between supporters and opponents of the Arrow Cross. While it is true to say that many supporters of more conservative political forces regarded the Arrow Cross as irresponsible radicals, National Socialism was merely the most radical manifestation of a broader political shift to the Right.

Perhaps it is unfair to criticize Ormos overly for these failings, as she is relying on a secondary literature that is highly undeveloped in this regard, and her own research has concentrated on the political, diplomatic, and intellectual realms. Even so, limited and promising work is being conducted by some in Hungary on the popular dimensions of politics in this period.[4] It is to be hoped that this research will be expanded. If so, it would allow for debate on questions such as consent and legitimacy on the Hungarian home front immediately before and during the Second World War, the social dimensions of the anti-Jewish laws from 1938 onwards, and the contours of politics and popular participation in them at the local level during the interwar period.

Notes

[1]. C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1919-1945*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961).

[2]. See, for example, Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism in Hungary, 1890-1944* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Miklós Zeidler, *A magyar irredenta kultusz a kőt világháború kőzött* (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2002).

[3]. Mária Ormos, *A Gazdasági Világválság Magyar visszahangja* (Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó-PolgART Könyvkiadó, 2004).

[4]. For an outstanding example, see Zoltán Paksy, “A nyilaskeresztes mozgalom tevékenységének társadalmi bázisa a Dunántálon 1932 és 1935 között,” in *Az Antiszemitizmus Alakváltozatai: Tanulmányok*, ed. Zoltán Paksy (Zalaegerszeg: Zala Megyei Levéltár, 2005), 106-167.

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