



Csaba Téglaś. *Budapest Exit: A Memoir of Fascism, Communism and Freedom.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998. xii + 162 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-823-9.



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Remembering Life in a Turbulent Era

Csaba Téglaś has written a lucid memoir that recounts his experiences during one of the most turbulent decades in the history of twentieth century Hungary. Téglaś tells the story of his and his family's experiences during the close of World War II, the record post-war inflation that followed it, Stalinism and Revolution. It closes with an account of his experiences as a post-1956 refugee – something that has sadly been much neglected in many memoirs.

The tragic history of Hungary during World War II and after has produced a large number of published memoirs. Two memorable accounts of the show trials by George Paloczi-Horvath[1] and Bela Szasz[2] appeared long before the collapse of state socialism. In 1980 Bill Lomax[3] published an anthology of memoirs of selected participant in the 1956 Revolution in English. With Hungary's peaceful transition to democracy between 1988 and 1990, recollections of the period by key participants have appeared both inside Hungary and in the west. Sándor Marai's diary dealing with the post-war coalition period appeared in English translation in 1996[4] and more sensationally, in Hungary itself, the valedictory memoirs

of Matyas Rakosi were published in late 1997.[5] The impact of the appearance of personal accounts in print over the past decade has played an important role in broadening the range of available source material for those seeking to write the history of the period. The challenge of interpreting the mass of available material – not only in the form of memoirs, but also the large amount of archival material that has been made available since 1989 – has yet to be taken up by the historical community.

Csaba Téglaś's memoir makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of this tragic period. This is not the memoir of a political leader – although Téglaś refers to unspecified political activities during the 1956 Revolution. It is not the memoir of a victim of the show trials, or a key player during any of the period. Its value lies in its description of the impact of enormous political upheaval on everyday life. It provides valuable source material for anyone seeking to write the social history of Hungary's middle class during the years of war, inflation, Stalinism and then revolution. Téglaś describes the onset of direct conflict in Budapest and the neighbouring area. He captures the trauma of life in a theatre of war, and the now

well documented brutality of the Soviet occupying forces at the war's end. The penury to which even the salaried middle classes were reduced during the year of hyper-inflation that followed the end of the war are captured in a way they are not in other accounts. The description of his participation in street selling – what was pejoratively described by the Communist Party as “speculation” – confirms the picture presented in both the archives and oral testimony: that a large section of the population responded to the hardships of hyper-inflation by participating in an enormous black market. The improvement in the economic situation following the introduction of the Forint in August 1946 – easily visible to the professional social historian with access to the statistics – is recorded in Teglas's memoir from his perspective as a participant.

His account of the era of high Stalinism when Matyas Rakosi transformed Hungary at an enormous social cost into a model Stalinist state is also revealing. Teglas adds to the vivid accounts of the period of show trial participants Paloczi-Horvath and Szasz by focusing on the impact of Stalinism on the daily life of university students. The picture of a despotic state aiming to supervise and mobilise university students behind its political programme, and the unspoken, yet powerful solidarity of the student body in opposition to it is superbly portrayed. This adds and strengthens the evidence in official documents from the period as well as the hundreds of eye-witness accounts collected by the Radio Free Europe Hungarian Department that, although the Hungarian state could prevent recourse to open resistance, it never secured the obedience of the population.

The account of revolution and escape is perhaps the part of the book that is the least novel. In part this is because the theme of escape from Hungary after the Soviet intervention in 1956 has been well covered in other memoirs. It is also because much of the historical research in Hungary has focused on the events of 1956 so that, in general, they have become well known.

As has been intimated above, Teglas's memoir contains much wonderful source material that would be useful for someone writing a social history of the fortunes of Hungary's pre-socialist middle class in the post-war years. The social history of post-war Hungary sadly remains virgin territory in general. As a social historian myself I have a feeling that the middle classes were much neglected by sociographers during the inter-war years and classified as “the intelligentsia” (an altogether different thing) during the socialist years. This group made up of minor public officials, notaries, lawyers, teachers, doc-

tors, bailiffs, clerks, artisans, shopkeepers and engineers formed an important social group in inter-war Hungary. In provincial Hungary, far out of sight of Budapest intellectuals, they formed an important part of local society. The incomes of those members of this group paid out of the state budget, like teachers, were reduced to near penury by post-war inflation and marginalised even during the popular front period. Public officials and clerks were sacked in large numbers as a consequence of the B-Lists used to exclude the politically suspect during the pre-1948 years. Horthy era public officials and the older middle class bore the brunt of day-to-day discrimination in the years of Rakosi's dictatorship. Some were subject to deportation while artisans and shopkeepers were subject to nationalisation and incorporation into the socialist labour force. Hungary's new rulers labeled them as “de-classed elements” and attempted to push them to the margins of society. The story of the extent to which this discriminatory policy was successful has yet to be written, and yet forms a central part of Hungary's social history during these years.

As someone who saw the middle class milieu in which he grew up eliminated by war and then by Stalinism, Teglas is at pains to construct his narrative around the theme of making a contrast between dictatorship and freedom. Throughout his account he contrasts the lives and expectations of his children with his own life and expectations under war and dictatorship. This contrast adds to the narrative in that it strengthens Teglas's observations about the nature of freedom and servitude as well as conveying an impression of the subjective dimensions of daily life under a dictatorship. It also allows Teglas to communicate with the non-specialist and convey a powerful impression of place and period to the general reader. This has never been done in an unambiguously factual account of this period of Hungarian history.

Teglas uses this contrast between freedom and dictatorship to make a political point. The point is that the dictatorship he described held an absolutist and undemocratic view of the world that led it to infringe basic human rights and led to suffering on an enormous scale. He argues that this mindset was also present in the states of the former Yugoslavia and that this led to war. Using this analysis he makes a case for the importance of creating an order in Eastern Europe based upon the universal importance of self-determination and of basic human rights.

While I do not disagree with the author's political conclusions I would issue a word of caution about the historical analysis that underpins them. There can be no

doubt about the horrendous consequences of World War II for Hungary. Nor can there be any doubt about the pursuit of genocide by the Arrow Cross regime and their Nazi patrons. During the Stalinist years there can similarly be no doubt about the abuses of human rights that occurred, nor the enormous social cost of socialist industrialisation. But to argue that the Arrow Cross regime and the Stalinist regime were one of a kind or that the governments of the successor states of the old Yugoslavia can be easily equated with them is to distort the historical record. These political systems and events were the products of different historical contexts, political ideologies and geo-political configurations. Though they share a denial of the principles of basic human rights, tolerance and democracy to concentrate overly on what they hold in common obscures much about the workings of these states and the real lessons that can be drawn from these events. Classifying the different varieties and degrees of morally abhorrent practice in the past is an unpleasant, but very necessary task for the historian.

Notes

- [1]. George Paloczi-Horvath, *The Undefeated* (Lon-

don: Eland, 1959).

- [2]. Bela Szasz, *Nothing but the Truth: Post-mortem of a Show Trial*, 2 v. (London: [s.n., 1963]; *Volunteers for the Gallows: Anatomy of a Show-trial* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971).

- [3]. Bill Lomax, *Eye-witness in Hungary: The Soviet Invasion of 1956* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1980).

- [4]. Sandor Marai, *Memoir of Hungary (1944-1948)*. Translated by Albert Tezla. (Budapest: Corvina in association Central European University Press, 1996). Reviewed on HABSBURG: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=3D2751894487894>.

- [5]. Matyas Rakosi, *Visszaemlekezesek, 1940-1956*, 2 v. (Budapest: Napvilag, 1997).

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