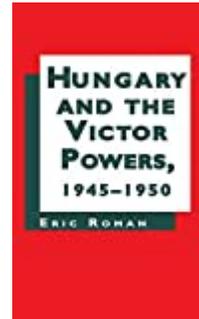




Eric Roman. *Hungary and the Victor Powers, 1945-1950.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. x + 342 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-15891-0.



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Hungarian Foreign Policy during the Cold War

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The end of communism in Eastern Europe and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union provided the opportunity for scholars to examine hitherto unavailable documents. These were expected to become sources for new interpretations on such a major historical issues as the Cold War. Until now, however, the archives revealed no startling secrets; they merely confirmed earlier conclusions that had been based on less complete primary evidence. At best, recent publications supported by new archival resources deviate from pre-1990 interpretations in nuance only.[1]

Eric Roman's monograph is a case in point for the above observation. His examination of the Hungarian archives led him to the conclusion that during the first three years following the war, Hungary was allowed to conduct an independent foreign policy (p. 140) and that the Soviet Union "exerted very little influence" even on internal affairs (p. 305). From 1947 to 1950, Hungary lost its sovereignty to the Soviet Union because of the Truman Doctrine, which led to the establishment of the Cominform, and because of the Stalin-Tito rift.

Roman's conclusion may be considered radical when contrasted with the once-popular Hugh Seton-Watson interpretation, written in 1965, that Stalin had the same blueprint for the takeover of the various states of Eastern Europe. Roman's assertions, however, tend to reinforce the conclusions of Charles Gati's award-winning 1986 monograph, *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc*. Where he offers new interpretations—such as the view that "Stalin, so firm in his policies toward other satellite states, seemed unable to make up his mind how to treat the hard-nosed Hungarians (p. 140)"—he is not always supported by the evidence.

In his book, Gati termed Hungary's short-lived sovereignty "the Polish trade-off." Stalin favored such a policy to keep on good terms with the Allies. He also expected that his Hungarian clones would delay bringing about about a Communist system for as long as "fifteen to twenty years." [2] American and Yugoslav foreign policy developments merely accelerated this trend. For Roman, however, the task of the Hungarian Communist Party was "not to be the vanguard of sovietization, but merely to act as a break on the impulse for a western ori-

entation” (p. 197).

Surprisingly, Gati’s book escaped Roman’s attention. He never refers to it, and it does not even appear in his short bibliography. It is unfortunate, as the weakness of *Hungary and the Victor Powers* is that Roman seems a bit confused about Soviet foreign policy-making for Eastern Europe. This process is masterfully described by Gati. Roman uses only published document collections, memoirs, and excellent secondary sources to trace American and British policy. He did not consult the Russian archives, although the Soviet Union was the major player in the region where, as Roman points out, the United States had “only [a] commercial, not political interest” (p. 169).

For Hungary, memoir literature is mostly overlooked, although after 1989 much has been published. Those sources could have clarified the meaning of many of the Hungarian archival documents Roman utilizes. A crucial source publication that should have been consulted is a collection of documents from the Russian archives, which detail the Hungarian Communists’ ties to Moscow.[3] This volume could, among other things, have clarified the Russian reaction to the participation of Matyas Rakosi, the Hungarian Communist leader, in the Hungarian government delegation’s official visit to the United States in June 1946. Roman claims that, according to a 1953 statement of Molotov, Stalin was angry with Rakosi because he joined the delegation (p. 139). Though it is true that Stalin was unhappy with Rakosi, Molotov said nothing of that sort in 1953. In fact Roman’s secondary source for the alleged Molotov statement makes no such statement.

Roman’s secondary source is the memoirs of the then Political Committee (Politburo) member Andras Hegedus, who was with Rakosi when Molotov attacked him. In his memoirs Hegedus wrote that after Stalin’s death, when the Russian leaders began to favor Imre Nagy instead of Rakosi, Molotov accused the Stalinist Rakosi of seeking a separate deal with the Americans. Hegedus expected that, in the well-established tradition of purge scripts, the trumped-up charge would be tied to Rakosi’s 1946 American visit.[4] While the non-existent part of Molotov’s charge may support Roman’s thesis that the Hungarians conducted an independent foreign policy, regardless of Soviet approbation, Rakosi’s letter to Stalin on the American visit contradicts this. The letter indicates that this Hungarian disciple was very eager to show how useful his visit was for Hungarian Communist interests—and for the Soviet Union. He even hinted to Stalin that

a Hungarian-American contact could be approached for some atomic secrets.[5]

One must also remember that Stalin was always suspicious of Communist leaders who were successful negotiators in the West. For example, following Molotov’s visit to Washington and San Francisco, Stalin was ready to assume that the Soviet foreign minister had become an American spy.[6] In understanding Stalin’s attitudes toward Rakosi, Zoltan Vas’s observation may be correct that Stalin never liked Rakosi, for he always tried to impress the Soviet dictator with his brilliance. Stalin never appreciated people who seemed to be more knowledgeable than he was.[7]

The minutes of the Molotov-Rakosi meeting during the latter’s visit to Moscow at the end of April 1947, could also have given Roman pause in his assumption that the Kremlin did not underwrite the politics of the Hungarian Communists. At this meeting—not mentioned by Roman—Rakosi expressed his concern with the post-peace treaty possibility of the Soviet army’s leaving Hungary. Rakosi’s mind, however, was put at ease that it would not happen. This gave the Hungarian Communists the opportunity for the complete destruction of the Smallholders, the dominant party in the coalition.

In Moscow, Molotov also berated the Hungarian Communists for not forming a multi-party voting bloc in 1945, which could have prevented the Smallholders from dominating government politics. Rakosi was forced to admit the mistake,[8] and upon his return from Moscow, the Communists implicated the Smallholder Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy in a trumped-up conspiracy whose earlier victim was Bela Kovacs. The Smallholders’ general secretary was arrested by the Red Army police on January 25, 1947, and was taken to the Soviet Union where he was imprisoned for eight years. Perhaps it is because of Roman’s uncritical reliance on archival documents of the Communist-controlled Ministry of Internal Affairs that he takes the so-called Kovacs-Nagy conspiracy seriously, believing that certain aspects of it had “some foundation in fact” (p. 167).

Hungary’s relations with another victor nation, Czechoslovakia, also form an important part of the book. Hungarian-Czechoslovak relations went through serious strains because of the Czechoslovak government’s determination to conduct “ethnic cleansing” among the Hungarians living on territories given to Czechoslovakia by the victors in the 1920 Peace Treaty of Trianon. President Benes’ infamous 1945 decree, which labeled the Hungarians traitors and stripped them of Czechoslovak cit-

izenship, was to be the justification for mass expulsion. This was prevented by the Western Allies, but Hungary had to accept an unfavorable, scaled-down population exchange.

Soviet responsibility for the outcome is well described. It is surprising, however, that Roman accepts at face value the claim that Stalin supported Czechoslovakia—and Romania—in territorial disputes with Hungary because Horthy's treacherous behavior cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers (p. 130). In fact Stalin used Hungarian lands to compensate Czechoslovakia and Romania for the loss of Ruthenia, Bessarabia, and Bukovina to the Soviet Union.

As in most books, there are factual errors. It is incorrect to consider the National Peasant Party in 1945 the "rural arm" of the Communists (p. 20). It is also imprecise to call the Comecon Stalin's Marshall Plan (p. 244). The Churchill-Stalin Percentages Agreement was made in 1944 and not in 1943. Moreover, at the fateful meeting the 50-50 deal of British- Soviet influence over Hungary (p. 26) was honed down by Molotov to a 20 percent British and 80 percent Soviet arrangement.[9] With this agreement, the British "resigned themselves to the status of bystanders in Hungary, the most anglophile nation of all of East Central Europe." [10]

Electronic typesetting has also played its devilish trick, as "Soviet" is spelled with lower case letters throughout the book.

Roman's monograph is a welcome addition to Cold War history, though its importance is tempered by over-ambitious claims not sufficiently substantiated.

Notes

[1]. Melvyn P. Leffler, "Inside Enemy Archives: The Cold War Reopened," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996): 121-22; John Lewis Gaddis, "The Tragedy of Cold War History," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 1 (January/February 1994): 142-54. In this essay Gaddis noted: "First, archives are important, even if all they do

is confirm old arguments (p. 147)."

[2]. Charles Gati, *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 5 and 21.

[3]. Lajos Izsak and Miklos Kun, eds., *Moszkvanak jelentjuk ... Titko dokumentumok 1944-1948* (Budapest, 1994).

[4]. Janos Nemes, *Rakosi Matyas szuletesnapja* (Budapest, 1988), p. 112; Andras Hegedus, *A tortenelem es a hatalom igezeteben* (Budapest, 1988), pp. 201-2.

[5]. *Moszkvanak jelentjuk*, pp. 95-98.

[6]. Miklos Kun, "Akik a jelenteseket olvastak Moszkvaban" in *ibid.*, p. 292.

[7]. Vas, *Betiltott konyvem*, p. 21; In his 1976 conversation with Felix Chuev. Molotov recalled: "Rakosi was good, but had shortcomings, too: he pretended to be Stalin in Hungary." *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics* (Chicago, Ill., 1993), p. 80.

[8]. *Moszkvanak jelentjuk*, pp. 195-207; for the English-language summary of the minutes, see Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 99-100. In this monograph Zubok and Pleshakov see Stalin as considering two options for dealing with Hungary: Sovietization or Titoization (p. 100).

[9]. Albert Resis, "The Churchill-Stalin Secret 'Percentages' Agreement on the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944," *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (1978): 378.

[10]. Vojtech Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War* (New York, 1979), pp. 210-11.

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