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## Book Review

### *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron*

Deborah Cornelius, Fordham University Press, New York, 2011

Review by Csaba K. Zoltani

Interest in the 'good war,' World War II, remains unabated as shown by the large number of books dealing with the subject. Lately, events on the 'Eastern Front,' have also gained some interest, such as *Bloodlands, Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, by Timothy Snyder. Following the earlier book by Cecil D. Eby, *Hungary at War, Civilians and Soldiers in World War II* (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA 1998), Deborah Cornelius' *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron* (Fordham University Press, New York 2011) gives an excellent overview of the events leading up to and the horrendous events of World War II in Hungary.

The effect of the Treaty of Trianon, that without plebiscites, truncated Hungary and deprived it of its natural resources and forced a sizeable portion of its population to live under alien jurisdiction, set the political and sociological climate in Hungary from the 1920's on. Cornelius gives an excellent overview of the readjustment that expressed itself in the politics and led to the belief that revision of the treaty was only possible through German intervention. The reviewer understands the limitations of space, but impoverishment, joblessness, forced short working hours, early retirement and the huge discrepancy between the well-to-do and the majority of the population could have merited more discussion.

To overcome the sociological difficulties, participation in the upcoming war preparations offered a possible solution. Several impediments for an enthusiastic participation included the fact that the average Hungarian felt no enmity toward Russians and also Hungary lacked the resources and equipment for its armed forces. Hungarian workers did not have the technical background needed for modern industrial production, and Germany was reluctant to share its knowledge, stating that "Hungary was an agricultural country" and should stick to it.

The Hungarian government spent 60 B pengő, a sizeable financial investment, for the development of the infrastructure and equipping the military. The rapid industrial expansion quickly led to full employment and increased consumer spending. The negotiated Vienna Awards, yielding the return of some of the Hungarian territories, improved the access to raw materials and increased the available work force.

Yielding to German pressure, anti-Jewish laws were passed by Parliament in 1938-39, affecting the lives of primarily lower class Jews and depriving professionals of their livelihood, and of educational opportunities. Until the German occupation in 1944, Hungarian Jews were not physically harmed.

Despite reluctance on the part of the Hungarian leadership, Hitler pushed for Hungarian participation in the war against the Soviet Union. The 'Kassa bombing,' where three aircraft of unknown origin dropped bombs allegedly of Soviet make resulting in casualties and damage in the Hungarian town, convinced the Hungarian leadership that Hungary was under attack. War was declared on June 27, 1941. The initial Hungarian military move was the deployment of the Carpathian Group, consisting of 90,000 ill equipped troops, to the Soviet Union. Later, under the German Army Group South, it participated in the occupation of Ukraine. Also, the Second Hungarian Army was sent to the Don, flanked by the Romanian and Italian armies, to support the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Hungarian Jews were drafted, as were men of the general population, but sometimes served under severe conditions, in labor battalions. When captured, the Soviets treated them as regular prisoners of war.

The army was ill equipped and ill trained. Many of its soldiers could not drive, and never had fired large caliber weapons. In January 1943, the Soviet counterattack resulted in the destruction of the whole Second Army, with the estimated loss of over 120,000 soldiers. The Hungarian leadership failed to acknowledge publicly the loss, but eventually Hungarian units were withdrawn from Soviet territory.

Operation Margarethe, the German military occupation of Hungary, began on March 19, 1944 and brought profound changes. Nazi Germany sought to reorganize and thus harvest the Hungarian economy and raw materials, including bauxite and manganese, to further the German war effort. To add insult to injury, Hungary was required to pay for the German occupation. Secondly, the occupation was to initiate the deportation of Jewish citizens of Hungary.

The notorious Eichmann set the wheels in motion. As done in other occupied countries, this was to be accomplished in six steps: at first Jews were to be identified and required to wear yellow 6 cornered stars of a certain size, workers removed from their jobs, businesses turned over to Christians, travel was forbidden, Jewish assets (estimated to be over 20% of Hungary's) impounded, establishment of ghettos in all town larger than 10,000 in population, and finally deportation. Initially the German request was for 100,000 workers to be sent to Germany that Eichmann offered to transport. In rural areas, the constabulary was tasked with carrying out the order, with deportations from Budapest to be accomplished last.

The established Jewish Councils were instrumental in ghettoizing the Jewish communities. However, after the initial deportations, two escapees from Auschwitz wrote, in German, a report now called the *Auschwitz Protocols* that described the horrendous conditions in the camp. The Jewish Councils did not share this information with their communities, but based on this information, Hungarian church leaders, Protestants and Catholic alike, and later the Vatican and others wrote to Regent Horthy to stop the deportations. Horthy instructed Lt. Gen. Károly Lázár, commander of his personal bodyguard, to assume command and prevent a coup d'état by the constabulary that threatened to take over the government and carry out Eichmann's plans. By pure chance, on July 2, 1944, Lt. Gen. Lázár met Colonel Ferenc Koszorus, commander of the First Armored Division stationed north of Budapest, and became aware of the presence of these unpublicized military resources. Regent Horthy ordered the military to remove the illegally assembled gendarmes from Budapest. This order was efficiently carried out, saving from deportation most of the 170,000 Jews registered there at that time. This was the only instance where Axis military forces were used to save the lives of Jews from deportation.

In August 1944, Romania abandoned its alliance with Nazi Germany, despite the fact that it fielded the second largest land army against the Soviets, and joined its erstwhile enemy. The Russians pushed west but were unable to breach the Hungarian Carpathian defenses, the Arpad line. With their new allies they attacked from the south. In the fall, they broke through and advanced along the Hungarian Plain. In the tank battle near Debrecen they suffered an unexpected defeat, losing 500 tanks to the 133 that the Germans lost. This reversal prevented the advance and quick capture of Budapest.

The battle for Budapest turned out to be the bitterest engagement on the Eastern Front post-Stalingrad. The city was defended by 33,000 German and 37,000 Hungarian troops. An estimated 30,000 horses were brought by the cavalry and artillery troops into the city, consumption of which by the defenders and civilians later saved the lives of many. The city was encircled by the Soviet and Romanian troops on December 24, 1944 and the siege lasted until February 13, 1945. 23,624 civilians were killed and 12,588 homes completely destroyed. Military losses, killed, wounded and captured, were more than twice as high on the Soviet and Romanian side than of the Hungarian and German forces. The reviewer notes that there are some differences in the statistics cited by different authors describing these events. German attempts at recapturing Budapest were unsuccessful, and the Soviets continued their march toward Vienna. The Soviet commander-in-chief, Marshall Malinovsky on February 13 gave the 'liberators' of Budapest three days of free looting to celebrate.

The 'liberator' Red Army and Romanian soldiers raped an estimated 50,000 women in Budapest, 20% of whom became pregnant. Since Marshall Malinovsky was unable to produce the 110,000 prisoners of war he was expected to capture, some 50,000 men were picked up on the street and deported to concentration camps in the Soviet Union. Though precise figures are unavailable, an estimated one-third of the deportees never returned.

Cornelius devotes the concluding chapter of her book to postwar Hungary: People's Courts, land reform, reparations, nationalization of industry and agriculture. Alleged war criminals were all who served the former government, even civil servants. Included were also those who fled or were forced to go to Austria or Germany. The chapter also discussed the expulsion of Germans who had lived for centuries in Hungary. What the war left unscathed and what was not taken by the Germans, now the 'liberators' took as reparations. Missing from the book is a discussion of how the media and the schools treated recent history, the fate of Hungarians who, without their concurrence suddenly became second-class citizens of another country without physically moving, and the huge resources that the country and individuals lost. Transylvania, for example, was not even mentioned in school curricula.

The anti-fascist politicians, who survived the transformation, were systematically eliminated from the public sphere and the communists, after a short interregnum, in 1947 seized power. The war deprived Hungary of its middle and upper classes. The new ruling elite, supported by the 'temporarily' stationed Soviet forces, took charge of the radical transformation of society.

Cornelius' excellent book is a must read for anyone wishing to gain insight into Hungary's recent past and understand the events that continue to cast their shadow on current events of East-Central Europe.