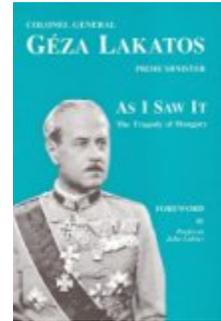


Geza Lakatos. *As I Saw It: The Tragedy of Hungary*. Englewood, N.J.: Universe Publishing, 1993. ix + 301 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-935484-16-8.

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Published on HABSBUrg (August, 1997)



## The Tragic Story of General Lakatos, Premier of Hungary in 1944

General Geza Lakatos was a tragic figure of Hungary's evolution during World War II. In late August of 1944, he was asked by the country's head of state, Admiral Regent Miklos Horthy, to form a government with the secret task of preparing Hungary's defection from the Axis. This assignment was an impossible one and the attempt to accomplish it on October 15th resulted in the ending of Lakatos's (as well as Horthy's) distinguished career. This book tells the history of that career, with particular emphasis on the story of the preparations for Hungary's ill-fated defection from the Nazi alliance during final phases of the Second World War.

It was published posthumously, as Lakatos died in 1967 in Australia and the project of publishing his memoirs fell to his daughter, Mrs. Maria Szent-Ivany. In Hungary, there would have been public interest in his story, but in the Hungary of the post-1956 Kadar era books by generals of the Horthy regime, it could not be published, at least not without being rewritten by communist editors. As a result, the work was published in Hungarian, in the West. After the collapse of communism in Hungary in 1989, it was published there as well, with copious annotations, additional documentation, and a biographical essay by the noted military historian Sandor Szakaly [in 1992].<sup>[1]</sup> In the meantime, preparation had been made for the publication of an English version, translated by Hungarian-American historian Mario D. Fenyó.<sup>[2]</sup> Alas, this edition does not contain the additions made to the one published recently in Hungary; but it does feature a succinct preface by John Lukacs as well as a few photographs that were not in the very first edition.<sup>[3]</sup>

Lakatos and his twin brother Kalman received their education in the military schools of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Their adolescent experiences must have been similar to those described by Istvan Deak in his studies about the education of Habsburg officers. Both of them were outstanding students and they were destined for a promising career. Tragedy struck early during the Great War when Kalman was killed on the Russian front. At one point during the war Geza was also severely wounded, but recovered from his wounds.

After the war, the author was compelled to serve Hungary's Red Army during the revolutionary regime of Bela Kun. He acted as a technical advisor to Vilmos Bohm, the army's commander in chief, whom he describes as a former typewriter salesman. Before long, Lakatos escaped from Red Army headquarters and joined the forces of the anti-communist counter-revolutionaries.

During the inter-war years Lakatos had a number of important assignments, including a stint as military attache in Prague. When we get to the early years of World War II, we find that Lakatos's memoir becomes less of an autobiography and more of a political commentary. He portrays General Staff Chief Henrik Werth as the arch supporter of the German orientation in Hungarian strategic thinking. Regent Horthy he describes as an honourable statesman who disliked Hitler and did not care for the Nazis, but who often got carried away and made decisions without sleeping on them. These are not at all unconventional historical assessments of these two men.

From the spring of 1943 to that of the following year Lakatos was the commander of the Hungarian units operating on Soviet soil. His appointment came after the virtual annihilation of the Second Hungarian Army in the Red Army's winter offensive of 1942-43, and it lasted until after the occupation of Hungary by the Wehrmacht. For most of this period, Hungarian units in Russia, some of them remnants of the Second Army, were assigned occupation duties behind German lines. Their tasks were not easy as they had to cover a huge area and had to deal with a growing partisan movement.

Throughout most of 1943, Lakatos considered it to be his main task to make sure that his troops did not become involved in confrontation with front-line Soviet forces, either as a result of the latter's sudden forward thrusts, or as a result of German attempts to use Hungarian troops as active reserves. It should be explained here that Hungarian units were unsuitable for active warfare as they were not equipped for it. In particular, they had no armour or any means of fighting Soviet armoured formations.

The transformation of Hungary's political situation in the spring of 1944 made a change in Lakatos's position nearly inevitable. Horthy and his closest advisors were most unhappy with the situation that developed after their country had been occupied by German forces, and were determined to do everything possible to regain a measure of control over Hungary's affairs. Little could be done while the Nazis were still in control of much of Central and Western Europe, but that situation changed after further reverses were suffered by the Wehrmacht, especially in France after the Allies' landing in Normandy.

Regent Horthy assigned a major role to Lakatos in his bid for regaining some influence in directing the destiny of his country. In late August of 1944, Horthy asked Lakatos to head a "government of experts"—military officers and senior civil servants—the secret task of which was to prepare Hungary for defection from the Axis. The undertaking was fraught with great difficulties and dangers. To the surprise of many, the establishment of this government was accomplished, despite the fact that it irritated the Germans. Some compromises were made in the composition of the new government to appease Berlin; nevertheless, the new administration did embark on its mission. Many pro-Nazi officials, installed only recently after the German occupation of Hungary, were removed from power. The deportation of Jews, discontinued on Horthy's orders even before Lakatos took office, was stalled by obstructionist tactics.

By September, the new government had to deal with the problem of Soviet troops entering Hungarian territory, a development made possible in part by Rumania's switch from the Axis to the Allied side. At this point Hungary's elite, and even some members and advisers of Lakatos's government, had two highly contradictory objectives: to keep the country from being occupied by the Red Army (and its new Rumanian allies), and to effect Hungary's defection from the war. Many members of Hungary's elite could not decide which of these goals was more important, and some did not realize, or were slow to realize, that both of these objectives could not be pursued simultaneously.

Preparing for Hungary's exit from the war, however, a number of grave mistakes were committed. One of them resulted from a scheme to gain an excuse for the planned defection. After some significant advances by the Red Army in southern Transylvania, the Hungarian government presented Berlin with a ultimatum to transfer without delay substantial German forces to Hungary to stop the Soviet onslaught. The expectation was that the Germans would not or could not comply with the demand, which would give the government in Budapest an excuse to seek an armistice with the Soviets. However, the Nazi leaders promised to send the forces requested, even though not as fast as specified. This promise went a long way to deprive the Hungarian government of a solid excuse for quitting the German alliance. It also resulted in the presence of more German troops in Hungary, most of them deployed not so much to prevent further Soviet advances in the East as to keep a watch over the political maneuvering of the government in Budapest.

In the meantime, Horthy dispatched through German-controlled lands two secret missions: one to Anglo-American authorities in Italy and the other to Moscow. Though both delegations managed to reach their destinations, they failed to attain their aim. The first delegation was basically rebuffed while the second was in the end presented with armistice terms that in Lakatos's view—and we can hardly disagree with him—were impossible to implement.

The Germans got wind of these activities and continued their preparations for the event of a possible Hungarian attempt to quit the war. Among other things, they began arming members of the Arrow Cross Party and sheltered the party's leaders from possible arrest by pro-Horthy authorities. They dispatched SS special operations specialists, led by Otto Skorzeny, to arrest or kidnap important members of Horthy's entourage and hold

them hostage. Their foremost prize became Miklos Horthy Jr., the Regent's only surviving child.

There were other problems as well. Lakatos and Horthy did not see eye to eye regarding the part of the planned address to the nation by Horthy which called for the declaring of war against Germany. Lakatos believed that neither the country's strategic situation nor the attitudes prevailing among the Hungarian military made such a move possible. In the end, the passage was deleted, even though the agreement that Horthy's emissaries had reached in Moscow had explicitly called for such a declaration. Though the immediate onset of hostilities between Hungary and Germany was not mentioned, Horthy's radio announcement of mid-day October 15th must have come as a surprise to most Hungarians, not to speak of Germans—except those among the Nazi leaders who were sure that Horthy was up to something drastic. Bound by a sense of gentlemanly honour, within hours Horthy informed the German representative in Budapest of his decision to quit the war. Nevertheless, to most of his officers, the volte-face announced that day appeared as treason against the Germans.

As is well known, the attempt failed miserably. Elements of the Hungarian military—and Lakatos points his finger above all at Chief of the General Staff General Janos Voros—sabotaged Horthy's efforts. In Budapest itself, many members of the security forces defected to the Arrow Cross. A few officers suspected of unconditional loyalty to Horthy were arrested by their opponents early during the crisis. More importantly, the German officials and military commanders in Budapest took no chances. Soon after Horthy made his armistice announcement they captured the Hungarians' telecommunications facilities and began dispatching counter-orders and issuing counter-proclamations. They also brought heavy armour into the streets of the capital and threatened to assault Horthy's headquarters. Horthy soon realized what he should have known much earlier: under the given circumstances he and his inner circle of advisers, as well as Lakatos and the members of his cabinet, had been virtual hostages of the Germans from the very start. Within 24 hours, the whole affair was over. With the Royal Palace surrounded by SS commandos and Tiger II tanks, and with Lakatos and key members of the cabinet detained by German security personnel, the Hungarians had to yield. Under the threat of severe sanctions, the Nazis could dictate the terms of the recantation of Horthy's proclamation and arrange for the transfer of power to Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szalasi. He became Hungary's new "Prime Minister," even though Lakatos—as he

repeatedly stresses in his book—never officially resigned.

Lakatos's involvement in the attempt to take Hungary out of the war is a tragic tale. He had known from the very start that the enterprise had only a very slim chance of succeeding. As time went by, his faith in success kept diminishing; nevertheless, he persisted. Only at the very end, in the early hours of October 16th, did he assign greater priority to making sure that bloodshed was avoided than to continuing with an undertaking that was doomed to fail.

Lakatos's account of the events leading up to October 16th is detailed. It could hardly be complete since in the final days of the crisis Lakatos was not privy to the Royal Palace's inner secrets. By then decision-making had become concentrated in the hands of Horthy and an increasingly narrow group of trusted advisers. This situation was brought about in part by the need for utter secrecy, and in part by the lukewarm attitude of several members of the cabinet and the opposition of others. It is not surprising then that Lakatos's version of the story often contrasts with the accounts of the other men involved in the events who lived to tell their story, including Horthy himself.[4] From these—as well as from other, mainly archival and oral sources—the events of Hungary's attempted defection have been outlined by historians, starting with C.A. Macartney in the late 1950s, and ending with Thomas Sakmyster in his recent biography of Horthy. Macartney reconstructed Lakatos's role in the events of mid-October, 1944, partly from the testimony the general gave at the postwar trial of Arrow Cross leader Szalasi, and partly from interviews Macartney conducted with those members of Horthy's entourage who had ended up in Western exile after the war. Lakatos himself did not leave Hungary until the mid-1960.[5]

The existence of these secondary works notwithstanding, students of Hungarian history can benefit from reading Lakatos's book. It gives valuable details about many aspects of his career, not just those heady days of September and October 1944: his tour of duty in occupied Russia, and his fate after the demise of the Horthy regime. The latter stands in great contrast to his career before then: it brought him deteriorating health as well as various degrees of mistreatment, first by the Arrow Cross then by the Russians and, finally, by Hungary's communist masters.

The main shortcoming of this English-language edition of Lakatos's memoirs is the fact that it is a translation of the first rather than the second Hungarian edition. As

a result, much is missing from the book, including Sandor Szakaly's detailed notes, his excellent essay, as well as useful documents such as Lakatos's testimony at the war crimes trial of Szalasi. As the two editions were probably produced simultaneously it could be a mistake to fault either the English version's publisher or its translator for this problem. Another regrettable but not so important shortcoming of this English edition is the fact that Hungarian diacritical marks have been omitted by the printers, even though the book was published by a Hungarian-owned publishing company. Alas, the same shortcoming is true of this review as posted to the list, as characters with diacritical marks usually do not show up in documents distributed via e-mail.

## Notes:

[1]. Geza Lakatos. *Ahogy en lattam: Visszaemlekezések* (Munich: Aurora, 1981).

[2]. Geza Lakatos. *Ahogy en lattam* (Budapest: Europa-Historia, 1992). Annotated and edited by Sandor Szakaly.

[3]. Istvan Deak, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[4]. For Horthy's own account see Nicholas Horthy, *Memoirs* (New York: Robert Speller, 1957). Lakatos's autobiography might be compared to the memoirs of his Minister of External Affairs at the time of the crisis, Gusztav

Hennyey, *Ungarns Schicksal zwischen Ost und West* (Mainz: Von Hase-Koehler, 1975), as well as to Antal Vattay, *Vattay Antal Naploja, 1944-1945* (Budapest: Zrinyi, 1990), Karoly Vigh ed. Though it contains entries only for the post-October days, Vattay's work throws some light on events before then. Since at the time of the crisis General Vattay was a member of Horthy's inner circle of collaborators, he probably knew more of what was going on in the Palace than did Lakatos.

[5]. C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929-1944* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961) 2nd edition, 2 vols. The most detailed treatment of these events in Hungarian is Karoly Vigh, *Ugras a sotetbe* (Budapest, Magveto, 1984), 2nd enlarged edition. An up-to-date account, focusing on the ideas and actions of Horthy, is Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklos Horthy, 1918-1944* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1994), soon to be reviewed on HABSBERG. For a popular, illustrated, English language description of how the Germans liquidated the meagre Hungarian support for the attempted defection see Jean Paul Pallud, "Operation Panzerfaust," in *After the Battle* no. 40 (1983), pp. 12-27.

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**Citation:** Nandor F. Dreisziger. Review of Lakatos, Geza, *As I Saw It: The Tragedy of Hungary*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

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