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Thomas Sakmyster. *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklos Horthy, 1918-1944.* Boulder, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. x + 476 pp. $59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-293-4.

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The Stranded Admiral

Thomas Sakmyster is to be commended for his temerity in writing the first full-length scholarly study of Hungary's most controversial figure in this century, Miklos Horthy (1868-1957). Sakmyster's work is also timely and much needed. Since the departure of Hungary from the Soviet system in 1989-1990, the public debate over Horthy has been uncensored and quite spirited. Moreover, just months before its publication Horthy's remains were returned to Hungary from Portugal, where he had lived the last years of his life. He was reburied in his home town of Kenderes in a ceremony broadcast on state television on September 4, 1993.

Horthy was a national symbol throughout his political career from 1918 to 1944, partly of his own making but one manipulated by others. Sakmyster refers to him as "the 'link and compromise"' (p 59), the figure around whom all counter-revolutionary groups in Hungary could unite. Miklos Horthy was the indispensable front man, and derived power and public adulation from this indispensability, but this role also reflects contradictions in his thinking which he never mastered or overcame. He remained to some extent inscrutable and unpredictable, often used by one faction or another to advance its agenda, but never the exclusive tool of one of them. In fact, at several points in his political career, when Horthy seemed to have become the property of one faction, he confounded expectations by taking a quantum jump in the opposing direction. All assessments of the Old Regime's restoration in Hungary from 1919 to 1944 must deal with him. Inasmuch as the genocidal deportation to German camps of most of Hungary's Jewish population occurred in the final months of Horthy's Regency, all assessments of the extent of Hungarian guilt or responsibility in this culminating operation of the Shoah must, also, deal with Horthy. Here, too, the author provides us with a complex picture. He has done justice to his subject.

Sakmyster has deployed his analytical skills well. His twelve-chapter study focuses on the public Horthy, primarily because materials that might have allowed more insight into the private man are sorely lacking. Private papers and letters are very scanty. Although Horthy was a member of the Hungarian Reformed Church, his religious devotion seems to have been nominal, and he was uninfluenced by Calvinist traditions of introspection and self-examination. A man of action rather than of reflection, Horthy had little capacity or patience for complex ideas or proposals. He always had a preference for spoken communication, and this became even more marked in his last years in office. In his introduction Sakmyster characterizes the memoirs Horthy wrote in exile[1] as "unreliable and largely uninformative" (p. viii).

The book portrays a man who was good-natured and often charming, but also shallow. An intellectual lightweight, Horthy did possess, however, a gift for languages that was to stand him in good stead throughout his life. Both in his naval career and in foreign relations as Regent, Horthy's language ability and charm combined to gain him many friends. Uninhibited in personal discourse, Horthy often made casual statements indicative of "vulgar prejudices and darker impulses" (p. ix), statements which would send his handlers scrambling to dissuade him or to repair the damage. Among these prejudices was anti-Semitism, which by the 1880s, when Horthy was coming of age, was becoming widespread among the upper middle class of gentry origin. Horthy often gave private voice to such sentiments, but he also liked to surround himself with and gain the approval of the two social groups that were the main support of the Old Regime in Hungary by the 1880s: the landed aristocracy and Jewish industrialists and financiers.

Horthy's ability to bridge usually warring camps without declaring total loyalty to either may have been inherited from his father Istvan, a gentry landowner who strongly supported the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Although many of the gentry by the 1880s were

fleeing failing estates for positions in the civil service of Hungary, men of this class generally avoided careers in the German-speaking armed forces of the Dual Monarchy. Two of Istvan Horthy's sons, however, were sent into the military, one each into the Army and Navy. Miklos Horthy had a distinguished career in the Austro-Hungarian Navy, culminating in 1918 with his appointment as its last commander-in-chief with the rank of Vice Admiral.

On the very day Admiral Horthy surrendered the fleet, a revolutionary uprising in Budapest proclaimed the independence of Hungary from the Dual Monarchy. Having returned to the small estate he had inherited in Kenderes, Horthy watched as the government of the First Hungarian Republic was succeeded on March 21, 1919 by a Soviet Republic, which managed to survive until August 1. Sakmyster presents a Horthy who viewed bourgeois radicals, Social Democrats, and Communists as part of the same spectrum, the basic element of which was Jewish.

As the counter-revolution was taking shape, Horthy went to one of its centers, Szeged, which attracted, among others, proto-fascist adherents of the radical right. His rank entitled him to the position of commander-in-chief of a "national army," the actual organizer of which was Captain Gyula Gombos, the mastermind of the emergent radical right and a close associate of Horthy until Gombos's death. From the start, Horthy was a handy symbol–of continuity, authority, discipline, and, especially, the amorphous "Szeged Idea." Sakmyster shows how Horthy managed to rally around the Szeged shadow government highly disparate elements–some aristocrats and Jews still loyal to the monarchy, young officers who loathed the monarchy, those who considered it of the utmost importance to demean themselves as gentlemen of the old school, those who were prone to violence and bloodshed. Horthy would not shrink from condoning whatever was needed to "preserve order"; he had already revealed this during the mutinies in the Navy in 1918. Sakmyster documents in Horthy's rise to power a moral obtuseness to violence that was disturbing to traditional conservatives but endeared him to radical rightists. It is also very telling of the conservatives that, although disturbed by such methods, they accepted them as "necessary."

While a series of governments formed in Budapest sought to gain acceptance both from the Allied Powers meeting in Paris and key elements in Hungary, Horthy's "National Army" tried to reestablish order in Western Hungary, and the officer detachments of Pal Pronay and Gyula Ostenburg became notorious for the indiscriminate atrocities they perpetrated, particularly against Jews. Estimates of deaths owing to the White Terror of 1919-1920 range from 1,000 to 5,000, far more than those owing to the Red Terror of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

Miklos Horthy is not known to have participated personally in any act of terrorism, nor did he ever select victims. Furthermore, as Sakmyster points out, he never in his public speeches incited terrorism or violence against Jews. Nevertheless, Horthy obviously knew what was happening and believed it necessary. He also had a very keen sense of how much terrorism exercised by his supporters the market of public opinion, both in Hungary and abroad, would bear.

During these same months of 1919 Horthy rehearsed and previewed the routine that would cause him to be adulated in later decades. The speeches delivered at rallies in the towns and cities of Western Hungary were highly nationalistic, usually ending with "Long Live the Fatherland!" And he rode into each town on a white horse, thus linking himself symbolically with Arpad, the tribal chief who had led the Magyars into the Danubian Basin in the ninth century. Finally, having charmed Allied emissaries into thinking they had found their man, Horthy, mounted on his white horse, led his forces into Budapest on November 16, 1919, in a show of "liberation" he would repeat in the years 1938-1940 as Hungary reclaimed some of the territories lost in 1918-1920.

During 1920-21, as Horthy secured his election as Regent and rebuffed two attempts at Habsburg restoration, Sakmyster shows him shifting from political reliance on radical rightist officers to the more "respectable" and "gentlemanly" elements of the counter-revolutionary forces as embodied by the Transylvanian aristocrat who had headed the counter-revolutionary center in Vienna, Count Istvan Bethlen. Bethlen was appointed prime minister in April 1921 and remained in office until August 1931. Aware of how easily Horthy could be influenced, and informed of contacts between radical rightists in Germany and Hungary, Bethlen limited access to the Regent by radical rightists.

Gyula Gombos was kept away from Horthy for some years, but in September 1928 he prevailed upon Horthy to appoint him to an undersecretaryship in the Defense Ministry, the same position he had held in the Szeged shadow government. The author notes, very perceptively, I think, that this rapprochement with Gombos also enhanced Horthy's "pivotal role as the link between the two main right-wing camps" (p. 160) and meant that

he would be less taken for granted by the domineering Bethlen. Horthy was taking one of his periodic quantum jumps. Bethlen continued to have access to Horthy after his resignation from the prime ministry in 1931. Especially from 1936 on, when Bethlen was forced into parliamentary opposition, he headed a "kitchen cabinet" or camarilla of trusted conservative advisors to the Regent.

Sakmyster outlines succinctly the prime ministry of Gyula Gombos, 1932-1936, and its fateful consequences. Bethlen's power as *eminence grise* was still great enough at first that Horthy insisted Gombos would have to work with the existing Parliament, dominated by Bethlen's supporters, and that no anti-Jewish legislation or land reform could be proposed. What Gombos could not attain in 1932 he was able to attain, however, in the spring of 1935. Gombos prevailed upon Horthy to dissolve the Parliament and call for elections, the results of which gave Gombos and a government party reconstituted in his image a solid majority. In the meantime Gombos brought many radical-right cadres into the Army officer corps and the civil service. In foreign affairs Gombos realigned Hungary from an Italian orientation to a German one by the time he died of kidney disease.

During the next eight years, 1936-1944, each of the next five prime ministers chosen by Horthy was initially appointed with the approval of the conservative camarilla. Yet three of them would end up caving in both to German pressure from without and to Radical Rightist pressure in Hungary. The internal pressure was exacerbated by Hungarian military leaders who, unlike the older generation of officers trained in Habsburg days, became politicized and receptive to the new darling of the radical right, Ferenc Szalasi, head of the Arrow Cross Party. Sakmyster emphasizes that the politicization of the military leadership and its increasing sympathy with its German counterparts was condoned by the Supreme War Lord, i.e. the aging Regent.

One of the five prime ministers, Count Pal Teleki, coming under overwhelming pressure from Germany for Hungary to cooperate in its invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, committed suicide. Under his successor, Hungary not only declared war on the USSR, but also committed itself to sending an army of 200,000 to fight alongside the Germans on the Eastern Front. This step provoked yet another shift from Horthy, who forced the prime minister out of office in March 1942.

Horthy then appointed Miklos Kallay, promised him more freedom of action than any prime minister since Bethlen, and vowed that he would retain him for the duration of the war. Unfortunately, Kallay, like his predecessors since 1936, continued to be outflanked and politically undermined by Hungarian military leaders eager to cooperate with their German counterparts, and the Supreme War Lord rarely took decisive action to curb them. Sakmyster retells in a masterly manner the history of the "Kallay two-step," the strategy of either making a separate peace with the Allies should they win the war or co-existing with Germany if events should leave it dominant in Central Europe. Kallay was quite aware of Hungary's desperate situation as Soviet forces drew closer to the country's annexation-enhanced borders. He was sending out peace feelers to the Western Allies through a number of avenues. On the other hand, as Sakmyster shows, he really could not sabotage or obstruct the German war effort, as the Western Allies were demanding, because now only German forces stood between Hungary and the Soviet forces. Sakmyster's analysis of Horthy's balancing act in this period is supported in a recent article by Miklos Szinai.[2] Kallay's peace feelers were well-known to the Germans, and, as the latter feared a probable Soviet thrust at Germany through the Danubian Basin, they prepared to occupy Hungary militarily. At the same time, the SS saw the opportunity for access to Hungary's Jews.

In his treatment of the German occupation that began on March 19, 1944, and the accompanying deportation of the Jews, Sakmyster does not really add anything to what we know from the magisterial two-volume study of the deportation by Randolph L. Braham[3], nor does he disagree with his portrayal of Horthy. Obsessed by fear of the approaching Soviet forces, Horthy accepted the German occupation, with all its "inconveniences" (e.g., the Gestapo rounded up many of the anti-German advisors of the Regent; Kallay, after his resignation, fled for asylum to the Turkish Embassy; and Bethlen went underground), as a necessary sacrifice to be imposed on Hungary, far preferable to Soviet occupation. As Supreme War Lord he was interested in the few months after March 19 primarily in preserving the autonomy of Hungary's armed forces, an endeavor in which Sakmyster shows Horthy had very limited success.

Sakmyster also revisits the controversy over whether Horthy ought to have resigned from office on March 19, as Kallay and Bethlen, before fleeing German wrath, in fact pleaded with him to do, or continued to function as regent with a government agreed upon with German Plenipotentiary Edmund Veesenmayer. A delegation of Jewish industrialists saw Horthy right after his return from Salzburg and pleaded with him to remain in office. As events showed, Horthy would stand by these industri-

alists, some of whom he had played bridge with for years and whom he considered "the useful Jews." He would be roused finally to act decisively to save the nearly 200,000 Jews of Budapest, but he did nothing for the more than half million from the provinces who would be murdered, those whom he characterized as "the revolutionary Communist Jews" (p 340) or dismissed as "Galicians." Sakmyster depicts Kallay, at his last meeting with Horthy in March 1944, urging the latter to follow the example of King Christian X of Denmark, who had refused to associate himself in any way with the German occupation of his country. Horthy, however, remaining in character, could answer only by saying that he was still an admiral, and that a captain cannot leave his sinking ship. When asked by the Germans to approve the deportation of "a few hundred thousand" Jews for "labor service," he willingly assented, stipulating only that he would not put his signature on any aspect of it; this could be done through ministerial decrees. He probably knew that some cruel fate awaited the deportees, but "he preferred not to dwell on it" (p. 343) and was certainly too limited in imagination to understand what had been prepared at Auschwitz. He was also too limited in imagination to understand that posterity might see his part in what happened as reflecting negatively not only on his "honor" but also on the entire regime over which he presided.

Although appearing regularly in public, Horthy asserted himself as Supreme War Lord only on July 6, 1944, when, after receiving appeals from foreign governments, he ordered the dismissal of the two Interior Ministry officials in charge of the deportations and the withdrawal of gendarmerie units from Budapest. The deportations were halted before the Jews of the capital could be taken.

In recounting the sparring between Horthy and the Germans leading up to his proclamation of Hungary's withdrawal from the war on October 15, Sakmyster essentially agrees with the analysis of C.A. Macartney.[4] Viewing Romania's volte-face of August 23 as treacherous and "dishonorable" (p. 360), Horthy simply could not contemplate declaring war on Germany. In the last minutes of the eleventh hour, however, the arch-anti-Communist finally found it in him on October 11 to authorize the signing of a preliminary armistice in Moscow, an action Stalin apparently appreciated, because he decided subsequently that Horthy should not be tried as a war criminal at Nuremberg.

Having accepted the evil necessity, Horthy proceeded, however, to bungle its implementation. He naively believed that most Hungarian military officers would follow the orders of the Supreme War Lord on October 15 to cease fighting and that the Germans would honor his request for a withdrawal. He saw no need to arm the working class. Rather than flee, as advised, to the security of Army headquarters in Huszt in eastern Hungary ("A captain must stay with his sinking ship"), Horthy remained in the Royal Castle, although there were by this time a half million German soldiers in and around Budapest. Immediately after the armistice proclamation was read over the State Radio at 1 p.m., the Germans and their Hungarian supporters proceeded to sabotage it. The next day the Germans arrested Horthy and his family and took them to Bavaria.

In his concluding twelfth chapter Sakmyster gives a judicious and balanced assessment of Horthy's political career, pointing out again his lack of "political acumen" (p. 384) and, among his character flaws, his inability to accept responsibility for his own failures. The author has documented well the paradoxes and inconsistencies in Horthy's behavior. In Horthy's defense Sakmyster cites the character traits and old-fashioned sense of honor that the Regent displayed from July to October 1944. Horthy actually did help save the lives of most of the Jews of Budapest; if he had abdicated in March, they might have all perished with the others. As authoritarian as the Horthy regime was, Sakmyster concludes correctly that it always retained elements of pluralism.

Several times Sakmyster compares Horthy with Mannerheim, noting correctly that Horthy lacked the negotiating skills of the Marshal (p. 384) which enabled Finland to become the only country on the losing side in World War II not to suffer Allied occupation. Obsessed with the cause of territorial revisionism, Horthy, also unlike Mannerheim, allowed his country to fall under German domination. On the other hand, with all due respect, I think Sakmyster was momentarily nodding when comparing Horthy with other military heroes like Pilsudski and Eisenhower who subsequently became heads of state (p. 394); neither of the latter was a counter-revolutionary.

Sakmyster does not mention Henri Petain, but I see some points of comparison between him and Horthy. Both men were military heroes of their countries in World War I; and both were heads of state guiding their countries' collaboration with Germany in World War II in the struggle against Communism. Furthermore, both men, though suffering from the ravages of age (Petain was twelve years older than Horthy), continued as heads of state when their countries came under complete German military occupation–France in November 1942, and

Hungary in March 1944. Petain was turned over to France after the Liberation and tried by his country for war crimes; he was sentenced to death but then had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Hungary did not have the opportunity to try Horthy, who, after release from Allied custody in 1946, moved to Portugal. An irony of Horthy's final years, noted by the author, is that the Horthy family, lacking in solvency because it had never occurred to the Regent to salt away large sums abroad, was supported by a fund established by loyal friends, two of the major contributors to which were Jewish financiers whom Horthy had helped escape deportation to Auschwitz.

A final point of comparison between Vichy France and Horthy's Hungary is that, with the end of the Cold War, both regimes are coming in for reassessment, both by their own nations and by others. In this regard Thomas Sakmyster's study of Miklos Horthy is especially timely, and I would earnestly urge, if it has not already been arranged, that his study be translated for publication in Hungary.

Notes

[1]. Nicholas Horthy, *Memoirs* (New York: Robert Speller, 1957).

[2]. Miklos Szinai, "A magyar kormanyok politikaja a zsidokerdesben, 1936-1944. marcius 19," pp 179-197 in Randolph L. Braham and Attila Pok, ed., *The Holocaust in Hungary: Fifty Years Later* (New York, Budapest, and Boulder: Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Graduate Center of the City University of New York; Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: Europa Institute; Social Science Monographs; Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1997).

[3]. Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

[4]. *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929-1945*, 2nd edition, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961).

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