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Andrew Handler, Susan V. Meschel, eds. *Red Star, Blue Star: The Lives and Times of Jewish Students in Communist Hungary, 1948-1956.* Boulder and New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. x + 224 pp. $31.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-384-9.

Reviewed by Gyorgy Peteri (Norwegian University of Science and Technology-Trondheim)
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Rakosi and the Jews

This book puts its reviewer to a hard task. How should one treat a book on its own terms and consider, among other things, what its declared objectives are if the editors don't reveal them?

The book consists of two main sections: an editorial introduction signed by Andrew Handler and seventeen pieces of memoirs trying to recollect what life was like for a teenager survivor of the Holocaust in Rakosi's Hungary. A book like this doubtless has the potential to provide a genuine contribution to what is today a growing body of new scholarship on the political, social and cultural history of postwar youth, education, and, especially, of Jewish life in Eastern and East Central Europe after the Holocaust. It could have at least partly eliminated that remarkable blank spot on the map of the historical and social study of modern Hungarian Jewry acutely observed more than twenty years ago by an expert of the field, Peter Vardy: the lack of Jewish sociography.[1] A good example of how useful this sort of work can be for historical research is Michael Brenner's recently translated book, the general theme and organization of which are in many ways strikingly similar to those of Handler and Meschel's undertaking.[2]

That the editors of this book have not paid serious attention to the seventeen recollections (more than two-thirds of the book) shows clearly in a number of ways. Concise biographical presentations of the contributors should have been a matter of course–they are not there. The editors could have equipped the contributions with notes assisting and orienting non-specialist readers. A clear editorial design and assistance should have been in place to put things straight where memory fails, where consistency is lacking, or where cliches take over and drive out the truly interesting and informative material. To illustrate these points, allow me to quote just one example.

The recollections of Gabor Kalman (pp. 59-74) provide us with only small crumbs of concrete and lived experience, but they are rich in stylized *Stilleben*, seemingly taken from the everyday life of the 1950s. This serves much less to recount and make tangible for us how everyday life was than to illustrate and convey Kalman's understanding of the state socialist social order. His opinions are so firm that at times he seems to have felt justified in adjusting the "empirical" illustrations to his own opinions on how socialism worked. Kalman tells us that he went to work at a biomedical laboratory at the age of nineteen. He writes that the laboratory sought to "discover antibiotics." He hastens to add that he is aware that by then antibiotics "have already been discovered in the West and are widely available for a variety of illnesses, but Western literature, even in the scientific variety, is strictly forbidden for Communist Hungary, so we have to reinvent it ourselves all over again" (p. 67).

This claim about the prohibition of Western scientific literature is a mythological exaggeration. For scientists, unlike for their counterparts in the social sciences and humanities, there was no prohibition on the use of Western literature: as a matter of fact, their publications show they used *mostly* Western literature and they could and did *mainly* publish in the Western world even during the 1950s.[3] In such cases, an editorial intervention or a note advising the reader not familiar with the region's and the period's history would have been most desirable.

The editors fail to be explicit not only about the issues and themes, the purposes and methods of their project, but also about the criteria they applied in recruiting the authors of the recollections. If the book's central, organizing theme were "the lives and times of Jewish students" during the Rakosi era, one would expect that the editors would have expended some effort on making the sample constituted by their contributors representative. Indeed, the book is advertised by the distributor suggesting that the editors intended to "pinpoint the difficulties

of Jewish students *in all walks of life*."[4] The social statistics of the group of contributors, however, show a conspicuous degree of homogeneity.

Of the seventeen contributors, fourteen were born into middle class families. A great majority of them sustained and even improved on their parents' social position in the course of their lives: six of them are professors, four of them are established research scientists, two of them are artists, two of them are well educated professionals, one is an executive in the telecommunications industry, one is a housewife and one was an elite swimmer in the 1950s, with university education in pharmacy and a job history as pharmacist and top level trainer before becoming a pensioner. At the time of writing their contributions, only three of them lived in Hungary (in Budapest), eleven in the U.S. and Canada, and three in Scandinavia. This composition is certainly not representative of "all walks of life."

In this connection it should also be mentioned that Professor Handler challenges, in his introductory essay, what he terms the "reductivist view" prevailing in historiography, according to which anti-Semitism was rather insignificant during the revolution of 1956. He suggests instead that the massive exodus of Jewish Hungarians, approximately 20,000 of the total emigration of around 200,000 people, is fully explainable by the presence of anti-Semitic sentiments and actions in the countryside (pp. 36-37 and note 59 on pp. 49-50). There is no place in this review to show in detail how weak the foundations of Handler's revisionist thesis are. I confine myself to registering the fact that the witness accounts in the second half of the book do not substantiate his thesis either. These memoirs are written mostly by people who lived in Budapest in 1956, and only three of them lived in provincial cities such as Debrecen, Miskolc and Kalocsa. In none of these accounts can we read about violent acts or manifestations of anti-Semitism during the revolution; indeed, it is only Handler himself who tells of a serious, verbal, anti-Semitic assault that took place in an Austrian refugee camp, where he was awaiting his transfer to the U.S. (note 58, p. 49).

I do not wish to sound ungenerously critical towards the memoir section of the book. These recollections include some interesting and fine pieces, some of them with sections that could make parts of a good short story, like the first two sections of Eva Szekely's recollections (pp. 55-56). Others are amusing, like Paul Hollander's contribution when he half-jokingly discusses whether it was Communist rule that explained the Hungarians' "exceptionally troubled and intense love life" or whether we might talk in more general terms of the "romantic dispositions of Hungarians," a stereotype that has "a grain of truth" (p. 113). Not even the best (because concrete and life-like) recollections could, however, compensate for the lack of a general design for the whole undertaking, which one feels strongly both in the memoirs section and in the editorial introduction.

Professor Handler's introduction is uneven: there is little correspondence between it and the recollections; in a number of places it is erroneous in terms of fact, and the literature he refers to strikes me as somewhat outdated or inappropriate for the statements it supposedly supports; its propositions are all too often less than well argued, or are perplexingly odd. To this latter category belongs the portrayal of Matyas Rakosi and his attitude towards the Jews and Jewish Hungarians. Comparing Miklos Horthy and Rakosi, Handler says the following:

Hitler's frustration over Horthy's treatment of the Jews, which essentially amounted to non-compliance with the Nazis' rules on dealing with the Jewish Question, could hardly be more rageful than Stalin's annoyance with Rakosi for deviating from the slavish imitation of Soviet policy. Yet Horthy persevered and Rakosi committed indiscretions for which he, rather than Laszlo Rajk, could well have faced an avalanche of fabricated charges (pp. 24-25).

This claim comes as a surprise because (1) there exists, to my knowledge, no documentation of Stalin's "annoyance" over Rakosi's "deviations" in matters relating to the Jews; and (2) there is no evidence to show that Rakosi did in fact give Stalin any reason to be annoyed.

Handler compares a secondary description of two documents from Molotov's ministry of foreign affairs from the first half of 1942 with a small piece of text from Rakosi dated December 20, 1942.[5] The notes were sent in January and April to all the diplomatic partners of the USSR. As Walter Laqueur describes them, they gave the details of the atrocities committed by the German troops on Soviet soil, but they were conspicuously restrictive with information concerning the atrocities to which the Jewish population was exposed.[6] Handler cannot know how Rakosi's speech (or article), describing "the methodical killing of Jews by German and Hungarian soldiers and the activities in concentration camps" (p. 45, note 35) compares with Molotov's notes because he has only seen Laqueur's description and not the full text of these notes. But let us assume that Rakosi's text does indeed compare with Molotov's notes favourably in the sense that the former tried to convey the true scale and significance of the horrors afoot in the areas of German (and Hungarian)

occupation, while the latter rather suppressed the truth. How are we to understand this "deviation" of Rakosi from the "official line" of Moscow? Handler clearly provides us with this comparison because he believes it to be proof of what may have been the beginning or, at least, one manifestation of Rakosi's political integrity and independence regarding how he related to the Holocaust and the Jews.

I consider this comparison to be a breakdown of source criticism on the part of the author. Eight and ten months had gone by from Molotov's notes to the publication (or broadcasting?) of Rakosi's text. During that period there were a number of developments that changed allied attitudes (and, mostly, rhetoric) about the genocide that German forces and their local auxiliaries were perpetrating in occupied Europe. The news of the Nazi plans for the *Endloesung* reached the authorities of the U.S., Great Britain and the neutral countries relatively soon, but they did not want to believe it. Only by mid-November, 1942, had this information been confirmed. By then it became known also that about 2 million Jews had already been murdered. In the end, the declaration of December 12 of the Allied Powers registered publicly the fact that the latter were aware of the ongoing genocide and issued a warning that the perpetrators would be severely punished.[7] The Information Bureau of the Soviet Foreign Ministry went public on December 19 with an unsigned statement "dealing specifically with the 'execution by Hitlerite authorities of the plan to exterminate the Jewish population in the occupied territory of Europe."' As Laqueur writes, "This was a relatively short document but it presented more facts and figures than published in the preceding year-and-a-half taken together. It also mentioned the plan to concentrate millions of Jews from all parts of Europe 'for the purpose of murdering them'." [8]

This is, then, the background for Rakosi's text dated December 20, 1942. The text had doubtless been prompted by the Allied declaration of December 12 and, especially, by the communique of December 19 of the Information Bureau of the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Rakosi names both of these documents several times in his text of three printed pages. Not surprisingly, he refers more often to the Soviet document than to the Allied declaration. Indeed, it appears that most of his data are taken from the communique of Molotov's Information Bureau, even the ones pertinent to some of the atrocities committed by the Hungarian army. There is nothing in Rakosi's text that corroborates Handler's suggestion about "indiscretions" that could have earned Stalin's "annoyance." What Rakosi did was a tiny contribution to the work of the Soviet propaganda machine at a time when the Soviets already had decided to utilize the fate of the Jews in their anti-Axis war efforts.

Nor can Handler's remarkable suggestion be confirmed by the post-1945 developments–on the contrary! Rakosi may have been lagging behind his master in launching the Hungarian chapter of Stalin's "anti-Zionist" campaign, but he did follow suit.[9] In late 1952 and early 1953, he personally took charge of what could have become a new major wave of purges now directed against Jews, where a large section of the Jewish community that was targeted were party intellectuals. Indeed, the big bang of the anti-Jewish campaign would have come some time around mid-1953, if such a guess may be based on the fact that at the February 19, 1953 meeting of the Central Committee (*Kozponti Vezetoseg*) of the Communist Party, Rakosi urged the party to take resolute steps against the Zionists.[10] By May 1953 the AVH had already arrested a number of people and started interrogating them in accordance with a plot approved and possibly even designed by Rakosi. In the course of this purge Rakosi planned to conveniently rid himself of the person who acted as his right hand in the first wave of purges, the chief of the security forces, Peter Gabor. Thanks to Stalin's death and the political change thereafter, only the initial steps of the purge could be effected; in the era of the New Course, Rakosi had other, more pressing problems to address: he had to fight for his own political survival.

All in all, this book is a disappointment. But I would like to see it as a (relatively unsuccessful) part of a most welcome series of new efforts invested recently into the contemporary history of the Jewry of (Soviet-) Russia, Eastern and East-Central Europe. A great deal of these efforts are driven by the understanding that the historical study of Jewish life in the region is an indispensable part of our analysis of the region's societies in their entirety. Jewish history is not simply a sub-field, but a vitally important perspective on the history of the region as a whole. It should be part of all general courses (and textbooks) on the region's modern and contemporary history.[11] This is not only a matter of moral and political import, not only a matter of standing up against forgetting and against the revisionist/neo-fascist challenge, but also, and no less importantly, a matter of genuinely professional, academic significance.

Notes

[1]. Peter Vardy, "Befejezetlen mult–mai magyar zsido valosag," in: Robert Simon, ed., *Zsidokerdes Keletes Kozep-Europaban* (Budapest: ELTE, 1985), 463.

[2]. Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Life in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[3]. See Gabor Pallos, "Internationalism in Soviet World-Science: The Hungarian Case," in Elisabeth Crawford, Terry Shinn, and Sverker Sorlin, eds., *Denationalizing Science: The Contexts of International Scientific Practice* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Pulishers, 1992), *Sociology of the Sciences Yearbook* Vol. 18, 224-228.

[4]. See http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/fall97/f97handler.html

[5]. Matyas Rakosi, "A szabadsagszereto nepek egyuttes fellepese a zsidok tomeges meggyilkolasaval szemben," in Matyas Rakosi, *A magyar jovoert* (Budapest: Szikra, 1945), 91-94.

[6]. Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's 'Final Solution'* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980).

[7]. See Abraham J. Edelheit and Hershel Edelheit, *History of the Holocaust: A Handbook and Dictionary* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 132.

[8]. Laqueur, op cit., p. 70.

[9]. On the rapid deterioration of the situation of Soviet Jews from the Zhdanovschina onwards, see Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented History of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH, 1995).

[10]. See Matyas Rakosi, *Visszaemlekezesek 1940-1956* , 2 vols, (Budapest: Napvilag Kiado, 1997), vol. 2, 1099. See also Laszlo Csorba, "Izraelita felekezeti elet Magyarorszagon a veszkorszaktol a nyolcvanas evekig", in: Ferenc L. Lendvai, et al., eds., *Het evtized a hazai zsidosag eleteben*, vol. II (Budapest: MTA Filozofiai Intezet, 1990), 133; and documents nr. 6 and 7 in the Appendix of Robert Szabo, *A kommunista part es a zsidosag Magyarorszagon (1945-1956)* (Budapest: Windsor Kiado, 1995), 305-312.

[11]. A thought-provoking essay on this question is Jerzy Tomaszewski's "The History of the Jews as an Integral Part of the History of Poland and Other Central-European Societies: Theory and Reality," *Jewish Studies* Vol. 37 (1997), 107-128.

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