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Norbert Spannenberger. *Der Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn 1938-1944 unter Horthy und Hitler.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2002. 472 S. EUR 44.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-486-56710-6.

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The German-Hungarians Under Horthy and Hitler

The history of German minorities in Eastern Europe has remained one the most controversial topics in modern German and European history. In West Germany, as late as the mid-1980s (during the so-called *Historikerstreit*), the expulsion of Germans from the East was still used to relativize the crimes of the Nazi regime. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the official line was that the ethnic Germans deserved their fate, because they had acted as a fifth column before 1939 and as true Nazis during the war. The pain and suffering that accompanied the conflict on both sides, combined with the suppressed knowledge about one's role in the unfolding of events--not to mention the manipulation of memories by political parties and governments--, only entrenched these extremist views until everyone had become a victim, at least in his own eyes. As far as real history is concerned, the result of this politization has been disastrous: while there is no lack of memoirs and history books on the interwar history of German minorities and their subsequent expulsion, relatively few of these works are balanced enough to be taken seriously as a source, or to be recommended to undergraduate and graduate students.

Norbert Spannenberger's monograph on the history of the German minority in Hungary between 1918 and 1945 is a welcome exception in this regard. Rather than focusing on the expulsion, which would have made him popular among the expellees, Spannenberger took on the more difficult task of mapping the road to the disaster and explaining what happened to the German minority, from the perspective of its position in Hungarian society and political life in the interwar period. He argues that the history of the German minority in Hungary moved on a fixed course set by two larger forces: between 1919 and 1936, by traditional Hungarian enmity towards ethnic minorities and, between 1936 and 1945, by the tension-laden alliance between Hungary and Nazi Germany. Spannenberger suggests that, between these two forces, the first was the more important, and that the Hungarian government was ultimately more successful than its Nazi counterpart in achieving its goals.

The book offers a devastating indictment of the Hungarian political elite in the first half of the twentieth century. Spannenberger detects a strong line of continuity between the repressive policies of the Hungarian government before 1914 and its attitude towards Hungarian-Germans in the interwar period. He argues that after having drawn a lesson from the destruction of traditional Hungary (i.e. the national tragedy was the result of too much liberalism and too much respect for minority rights), the Hungarian political elite was determined to assimilate the largest of the country's surviving minorities, the Germans, after the war. Spannenberger shows that, with the excep-

tion of the democratic Károlyi regime in the immediate postwar period, no Hungarian government departed from this assimilationist line. Ironically, Spannenberger points out, the Hungarian state failed to recognize the contradiction between its policy towards ethnic Germans, whom they were quick to brand as traitors whenever they raised the issue of minority rights, and its own support of Hungarian organizations in the neighboring states and the mobilization of international public opinion in order to maximize their rights.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Hungarian politicians and public figures vilified the leader of the German ***Kulturverein***, Jacob Bleyer, even though Bleyer demanded only cultural rights and though he and his organization supported Hungarian revisionism. At least until 1936, the Hungarian government continued its assimilationist campaign: it closed down German schools or merged them with Hungarian ones, prevented the publication of German papers, harassed German community leaders, infiltrated ethnic organizations and forced upwardly mobile Germans to change their names. It was this blind nationalism, Spannenberger argues, that led to the decline in public support for the moderate ***Kulturverein***, which was concerned mainly with the preservation of cultural identity, and to the establishment of the more radical ***Volksbund*** in 1938.

According to Spannenberger, the policy of the Hungarian state towards its German minority between 1938 and 1945 was even more devious and ultimately more devastating. Until 1936, the Hungarian government considered the fate of the German minority as a strictly domestic affair and sought to restrict contact between ethnic organizations at home and German institutions and political movements abroad. On the eve of the war and during the armed conflict, it used the issue of minority rights to pressure the Nazi government into supporting Hungarian revisionism. This policy was at least partially successful because without German support Hungary could not have reconquered the predominantly Hungarian southern Slovakia and the ethnically more mixed Carpatho-Ukraine and northern Transylvania.

Although in 1940, in return for German support, the Hungarian government awarded special status to ethnic Germans and recognized the right of the Nazi regime to act as their protector, it not only failed to codify these concessions but also withdrew them whenever they collided with its short or long-term interests. The Horthy regime failed to give the German minority autonomy during the war, and ethnic Germans in Hungary continued to be worse off than in the neighboring states. While restricting minority rights, the Hungarian government allowed the German Army and the ***Waffen-SS*** to recruit soldiers among ethnic Germans in order to score points with the Nazi elite, and to save Hungarian blood.

Spannenberger also shows that the Hungarian government welcomed SS plans to remove ethnic Germans from Hungarian soil after the war, and indeed prompted the Nazis to this direction. He also suggests that anti-German sentiment was widespread in Hungarian society. Nationalists of every stripe distrusted ethnic Germans, Jews feared them, the social democrats disliked them for their support for right-wing programs and parties and finally the agrarian socialists and some of the Hungarian fascists sought to solve the agrarian issue in part by distributing their land among poor Hungarian peasants.

While unrelenting discrimination and the use of double standards were certainly important factors, and Spannenberger does a great job in highlighting these trends, I wonder if on the basis of the same documents he could have drawn different conclusions. For example, he is right to point out that ethnic Germans enjoyed fewer rights in Hungary than did Hungarians in Romania or Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s. While this is a valid point, the comparison, if only meant to imply that ethnic Germans in Hungary were worse

off than Hungarians in the neighboring states, is still misleading. After all, ethnic Germans were not forced to flee the country, as hundreds of thousand Hungarians did, fearing for their lives, after the First World War. While Hungarians in Romania increasingly became impoverished after 1919, German peasant communities in Hungary prospered (at least in comparison to their Hungarian counterparts) and assimilated Germans continued to occupy important positions in Hungarian society between the wars.

Moreover, tensions between Hungarians and ethnic Germans were never so high as to demand constant attention from the mother country, and while the desire of the Hungarian government to assimilate ethnic Germans violated both international laws and their sense of justice, it did not threaten their physical existence. To put it simply, while minorities did not have it easy in any country, ethnic Germans had a more secure life in Hungary than ethnic Hungarians in Romania or Yugoslavia.

Closely related to this issue is the importance of anti-German sentiments, which, the author suggests, was not only widely spread between the wars but also survived the conflict to inform historical memories about the *Volksbund* after 1945. The relative importance of anti-German sentiments requires further research. However, my feeling is that it was a minor force at least until 1938. Increased antipathy towards this group after 1938, on the other hand, cannot be separated from the perceived threat posed by the Third Reich. The Hungarian elite was keenly aware of the SS plans to take the western part of the country and was afraid that the Nazi government would exploit ethnic tensions, as it did in the *Sudetenland*, to realize its imperialist ambitions. In short, the fear was real and the growing suspicion, given Hitler's record, at least understandable.

The second most important factor determining the fate of the German minority in Hungary was the German government. Spannenberger shows that the Weimar Republic had very little interest in the fate of the German minority in South-Eastern Europe. Surprisingly, between 1933 and 1936, the Nazi regime, eager to break out of diplomatic isolation, was also reluctant to challenge the Hungarian government, which, as mentioned earlier, had traditionally considered the fate of ethnic Germans a purely domestic issue.

As a sign of increased assertiveness after 1936, however, the Nazi government began to flex its muscles in order to achieve more rights for ethnic Germans. Typically, though, they failed to speak with one voice on this issue. Spannenberger shows the two most important organizations involved in setting the parameters of Nazi policy were the Foreign Office and the SS, and in their competition, especially after 1940, the SS increasingly had the upper hand. Hitler paid little attention to Hungarian-Germans, and generally considered them of low racial value. The Nazis generally preferred the idea of resettling ethnic Germans from Hungary in the Reich or the freshly conquered East. In the short run, the Nazi government used the ethnic Germans as cannon fodder and exploited them economically by forcing them to work in Germany and to export their products at suppressed prices.

While Spannenberger does a great job in documenting the competition between the SS and the Foreign Office, one of the many bureaucratic struggles that fuelled the radicalization of the regime, he pays less attention to minor organizations involved in setting the parameters of Nazi policy. It would be interesting to know, for example, what role, if any, the Reich Student Leadership, Goebbel's Ministry of Propaganda, and the Ministry of Agriculture played in setting German policy and how these organizations imagined the future of Hungary in Nazi-dominated Europe and the role of German minority in the transformation process.

Spannenberger makes a passionate defense of the *Volksbund*, and its leader Franz A. Basch,

whom the Hungarians executed as a traitor and Nazi collaborator in 1946. He argues that Basch played a major role in keeping the *Volksbund* a moderate organization loyal to the Hungarian state. The author shows that Basch was a complex individual. He demanded not only cultural but also political rights for ethnic Germans; at the same time he fought a battle with the radicals within his organization, distrusted Himmler and the Nazis (who also disliked him both for his moderation and his love affair with a "non-Aryan" actress), supported the attempt of the Kállay government to jump out of the war, and had great reservations about the recruitment of ethnic Germans into the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen-SS*.

While Spannenberger rightly points outs that Basch was not a Nazi, it would have been useful, I believe, to define the political identity of Basch and his movement in a more direct way. Was Basch a traditional conservative or a member of the radical or conservative Right? Similarly, what was the position of the *Volksbund* in Hungarian political life? Did the *Volksbund* and the Arrow Cross, despite their disagreements on certain issues, represent the same historical force, namely fascism?

These larger questions, of course, do not reduce the value of Spannenberger's well-researched, thought-provoking and passionately argued book. I believe that the monograph should be read by everyone interested in minority issues, interwar Hungarian history and Hungarian-German relations. German specialists could also learn a lot about Nazi foreign policy and about decision-making in the Third Reich. I hope that the book will be translated both into Hungarian and English because it could serve to dispel some of the myths about the *Volksbund* and interwar ethnic relations in Hungary and at the same time would contribute to the deeper understanding of inter-ethnic rivalries that are still a serious problem in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe.

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