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The White Terror in Hungary from 1919 to 1921 was a period of right-wing political violence and antisemitism that laid the foundation for the Horthy regime, which lasted from 1919 to 1944. Béla Bodó argues that the White Terror in Hungary was driven by many of the same factors that drove paramilitary violence across Central and Eastern Europe: “the retreat of the state, culture of defeat, and the brutalization of soldiers and society” (p. xxii). He draws on theoretical and interpretive frameworks that make reference to that broader European historiography, but also includes the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, and the lynching of African Americans in the United States. Finally, Bodó situates this paramilitary violence in the national history of Hungary after 1914.

Right-wing paramilitary officers murdered three innocent Jewish Hungarian men, Albert Tószegi, Albert Gráner, and Ede Hamburger after a mock trial in the town of Fonyód near Lake Balaton in August 1919. Bodó's preface and first chapter take the Tószegi Affair as the jumping-off point for a broader investigation into the conditions under which acts of antisemitic and political violence were perpetrated in Hungary from 1919 to 1921. The murder was orchestrated by officers and men from the Prónay Detachment, a unit of Horthy's National Army. The ostensible reason for the three men's arrest was that they were communists, but the speeches at an open-air trial made it clear that they were being singled out as Jews, saddled with blame for the Red Terror, and falsely accused of disrespecting war veterans. The detachment officers recruited several peasants from the crowd to serve as the executioners after the improvised trial.

After the arrests, Mrs. Ilona Tószegi appealed to Admiral Horthy for help, but foot-dragging by Captain Prónay and defiance of orders by his officers meant the sham trial and execution went through anyway. The murder of the three men was well documented because Dr. Albert Tószegi was a member of a prominent Jewish industrialist family and a well-regarded public servant in his own right. The Tószegi family was able to publicize the killings and embarrassed the new Horthy government into setting up a commission to investigate the crime. The subsequent investigation meant that the officers, the village informants who denounced Tószegi, Gráner, and Hamburger, and the peasants who carried out the murders on behalf of the detachment were all clearly identified, but they nevertheless evaded punishment.

While the preface and first chapter are broadly narrative, the rest of the book is organized thematically. Chapter 2 addresses the rhythm of violence and the role of the militias as instigators of violence. Chapter 3 tackles the relationship...
between the Red Terror during the 1919 Republic of Councils and the White Terror of the counterrevolution between 1919 and 1921. Chapter 4 analyzes the geographic distribution of the White Terror in the Hungarian countryside but also in Budapest. Chapter 5 describes in detail the methods of violence used by the militias. Chapter 6 details the role of sexual assault against men and women. Chapter 7 delves into the motivations and social backgrounds of the perpetrators. The final chapter explains how the violence of the right-wing militias provided a valuable service to the new Horthy government, but was discarded once it became an obstacle to regime consolidation and good relations with the Entente powers.

The epilogue details the subsequent careers of the militia leaders and more prominent members during the Horthy years, World War II, and the Holocaust. A handful of perpetrators of the White Terror were tried in the 1950s, but by and large the prosecution of antisemitic violence was not a high priority for the communist regime. Bodó also uses the epilogue to address the larger question of how the militias, the White Terror, and the Horthy regime have been remembered in Hungary. In the 1990s various groups sought to rehabilitate the image of Admiral Horthy while ignoring both the White Terror and the marginalization, mistreatment, deportation, and murder of Hungarian Jews during World War II and the Holocaust. More recently, radical right-wing groups have sought to rehabilitate the militias and their leaders like Pál Prónay and Istvan Heijas in publications and public commemorations.

In light of these trends in historiography and social memory, Bodó’s book is relentlessly empirical. The atrocities of the militias are well documented by archival sources like court records, military records, and national, regional, and city archives. The Hungarian Social Democratic Party also made a point of collecting testimony from victims of the White Terror, while the British Labour Party conducted its own investigation. Bodó also draws on the memoirs of perpetrators and victims as well as photographs. Bodó does not shirk from including graphic descriptions of violence, torture, sexual assault, and murder drawn from these sources, which can make this book hard to read. The point of including these examples is not to shock, but to ground the actions of the militias, the Horthy regime, and their victims in a concrete reality.

Bodó deserves special mention for his use of photographs as sources in the book. He does not simply use them as illustrations, but analyzes them as primary documents. Bodó is very deliberate about this and it is particularly effective in chapter 3 where he compares and contrasts the social backgrounds, charisma, and self-image of the leaders of the White and Red militias like Captain Gyula Osztenburg-Morawek and Józef Cserny (pp. 111-113). Likewise in chapter 8, “The Bourgeois Rebels,” Bodó examines the self-fashioning of two prominent militia commanders, Iván Héjjás and Pál Prónay, through their photographic portraits. Both men tried to convey particular values appreciated by their peers and the right-wing public. According to Bodó Héjjás sought to highlight his nonconformity and defiance while Prónay aimed to represent values like “a strong will, idealism, and physical strength” that would inspire a personality cult in postwar politics (pp. 284-285). Bodó interestingly also analyzes some group photographs taken of both the perpetrators and victims of the terror. This analysis of atrocity photographs during the White Terror merits further research and its own article or essay.

There are several audiences for this book. First, Bodó’s analysis of antisemitic and political violence makes it part of the history of the Holocaust in Hungary and Central Europe more generally. Second, the in-depth discussion of militia violence against both Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarian civilians puts it into dialogue with the larger literature on paramilitary violence in Central and Eastern Europe between the world wars. Finally,
the book deserves to be read on the wider level of the global literature on human rights and paramilitary violence. The actions, motivations, and behaviors of the Hungarian militia men, their officers, and Hungarian political elites have striking parallels with not only contemporary actors like the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings of African Americans in the United States, but also paramilitaries in the former Yugoslavia, Liberia, and Sudan in the 1990s.

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