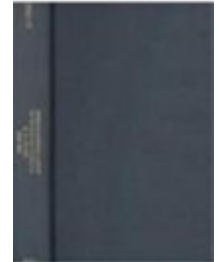




Tibor Frank. *From Habsburg Agent to Victorian Scholar: G.G. Zerffi 1820-1892.* Boulder, Co. and Highland Lakes, N.J.: Columbia University Press, 2000. 469 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-88033-474-7.



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The Many Faces of a Questionable Man

How can one be a journalist, revolutionary, secret service agent, art historian, historian, theorist on secularism, and lecturer in one lifetime? In this biography, historian Tibor Frank traces the perplexing career choices of George Gustavus Zerffi. Although the work primarily focuses on Zerffi's decisions, occupations, and motivations, readers may also gain insight into other fields of mid nineteenth-century history such as the politics of central and eastern European émigrés, the diplomatic position of certain European nations concerning the émigrés, the Austrian secret service; various publications of the time; and the impact that the 1848 revolutions had throughout Europe for decades. Frank presents the life of one man and intertwines his choices and fate with the conditions in Europe during the nineteenth century, thereby creating a fascinating narrative of a very complex character.

Both the preface and introduction of this book offer the reader an array of questions concerning G.G.Zerffi. This work reads much like a mystery novel, presenting the main characters

and an inquiry into the crime. Who was G.G. Zerffi and why would he, who participated as a Hungarian revolutionary as both a journalist and in uniform, betray his country and become a spy for the enemy, the Austrian government? Why did he express hostility for the national revolutionary hero, Lajos Kossuth? Did he ever meet Kossuth? And how was Zerffi able to succeed in acting as a double agent? In the first two chapters of the book, Frank attempts to answer these and other problems and unknowns concerning Zerffi's life.

A method Frank employs throughout his work to clarify any questions about Zerffi is to consider extant works on the subject and either support or refute them with his primary documents. For example, at the beginning of the first chapter, Frank introduces the controversy over Zerffi's heritage. He respectfully recounts József Kiss's research, which concludes that Zerffi was of Jewish lineage and his true family name was Hirsch. Based on his own sources, which includes material from the Hungarian National Archives, the National Lutheran Archives' Register of Surnames, the Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv in Vi-

enna and even a letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, Frank determines that Zerffi was Jewish, however his original surname was probably Cerf and eventually magyarized to Zerffi. Browsing through the bibliography, one cannot help but recognize and respect the amount of research Frank put into this piece. Throughout the work, Frank first refers to contemporary sources and then presents his own research and conclusions, summarizing for the reader the historiography on the subject.

In certain cases, however, the author was unable to locate all documentation on matters about which he draws conclusions. Such are the cases concerning when and why Zerffi joined the Austrian secret service, the reasons behind his departure from Belgrade, why Zerffi expended such great effort to make personal contact with Kossuth, and how he became a well-paid lecturer at the National Art Training School in London. Though the reader may question some of Frank's theories, in presenting them he draws the reader into his careful analysis.

The character of Zerffi and Frank's thought-provoking style draw the reader into this work, at least the first two chapters, reading it word for word. Zerffi from the beginning was a dubious personality. At eighteen he became a journalist, at first espousing liberal tenets and then turning toward conservatism. In 1848, in spite of his harsh words against Kossuth, he joined the revolutionaries as a pamphleteer and then became the editor of a journal, *Reform*, that supported liberalism and Kossuth. He was also involved politically as a member of the Equality Society, a radically leftist organization. Near the end of the revolution Zerffi even donned a Hungarian uniform, serving more as a detective than a soldier.

Soon thereafter, expelled from his homeland, he entered the Austrian secret service. His job was not only to provide the Habsburg Ministry of the Interior with information about the activities of the Hungarian emigres in the various nations

where he lived or traveled, but he also attempted to incite further conflicts within this already factionalized group. He even infiltrated and reported on other revolutionary exile groups, such as the Germans. His methods of espionage involved gaining the trust of certain high political officials within the émigré communities, including Bertalan Szemere and Karl Marx. Zerffi lied to, cheated, and manipulated a multitude of persons, including Marx, as a means of survival or for the prestige and financial profit. During his career as a secret agent, Zerffi sent 2,000 messages to Vienna. Minister of the Interior Alexander Bach and even the Habsburg Emperor considered them extremely valuable, according to Frank. Yet in 1865, in spite of his assumed importance, the Austrians dropped him without even acknowledging his numerous protestations and pleas.

Thereafter, Zerffi's chameleon-like, opportunistic behavior continued. He became a lecturer at the National Art Training School in London and authored a plethora of works, each of which the author explains in detail. Whatever intellectual trend was in fashion, Zerffi jumped on the bandwagon, adjusting his views to make his lectures or written works seem original. Zerffi's works mirrored the ideals and works of Hegel, Taine and Gobineau, to name a few of his models. In fact Frank, though appreciative of Zerffi's works as a scholar, acknowledges his lack of originality and at one point even states that "[...] Zerffi was also guilty of plagiarism since he took a number of facts and ideas from these two works" (p. 273). G.G. Zerffi died in 1892 in England. His obituary appeared in several papers, including the *Times*, which is a point Frank presents in the introduction and conclusion to show the importance in history of this unique man.

Zerffi's unscrupulous actions supply an intriguing story: though Frank stops short of labeling him unscrupulous since he attempts to throw a balanced light upon the person. The author adds further interest through his writing style. More-

over, the background and supplemental information on the history of the times, such as the Russian government's interest in the émigré movements and the framework of the Austrian secret service machine, provide the reader with a more continental vista of the impact of the 1848 revolution and the émigré situation. The author is so meticulous in his work that the reader might become confused by the multiplicity of personalities but for the glossary in the back of the book that provides a brief biography for each person mentioned. In addition, the appendix, which includes summaries of Zerffi's confidential reports, adds further insight into his activities.

There are some imperfections in this work. In some places Frank expresses pity for or excessive praise of Zerffi, for example when the Austrian government disposed of his services as a secret agent or his successes in the scholarly fields. Furthermore, the author seems to give more credit to Zerffi than he is due, as in the degree to which he increased the factionalism among the leading Hungarian émigrés and his effect upon Marx and or the impact of his disenchantment with Kossuth and others.

Nevertheless, this book captivates the reader through its subject matter, its research, and most certainly its writing style and subject matter. It attempts to penetrate the mind of an intriguing personality, G.G. Zerffi, and the dubious choices and many faces he presented during his life. Furthermore, it acquaints the reader with various arenas of mid nineteenth century politics, diplomacy, culture and society. The reviewer, though not fond by any means of Zerffi, was completely absorbed while reading this book.

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