



THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA  
ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARIÆ

*Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary:  
New Histories*

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# The Hungarian Historical Review

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## *Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary: New Histories*

Alexandra Szabó and András Szécsényi  
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

### *Contents*

#### *Contents*

#### INTRODUCTION

ANDREA PETÓ, ALEXANDRA M. SZABÓ, AND ANDRÁS SZÉCSÉNYI 385

#### ARTICLES

TAMÁS CSAPODY Bor Forced Labor Service as Reflected in Diaries 391

ALEXANDRA M. SZABÓ The Corporeal Continuation of the Holocaust:  
A Look at Miscarriages 408

HELÉNA HUHÁK Place Attachment in a Concentration Camp:  
Bergen-Belsen 430

EDIT JEGES Hungarian Holocaust Testimonies in Global  
Memory Frames: Digital Storytelling about  
“Change” and “Liberation” 452

ANDRÁS SZÉCSÉNYI Hillersleben: Spatial Experiences of a Hungarian  
Jew in a German DP Camp, 1945 470

ISTVÁN PÁL ÁDÁM Budapest Butchers, the Jewish Question,  
and Holocaust Survivors 491

BORBÁLA KLACSMANN Neglected Restitution: The Relations of the  
Government Commission for Abandoned  
Property and the Hungarian Jews, 1945–1948 512

FERENC LACZÓ From Collaboration to Cooperation: German  
Historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary 530

BOOK REVIEWS

- Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas. By Tatjana N. Jackson.  
Reviewed by Csete Katona 556
- Účtovné registre Bratislavskej kapituly 1417–1529 [Account registers of the  
chapter of Bratislava, 1417–1529]. By Rastislav Luz. Reviewed by Petra Vručina 559
- Media and Literature in Multilingual Hungary (1770–1820).  
Edited by Ágnes Dóbk, Gábor Mészáros, and Gábor Vaderna.  
Reviewed by Csenge Aradi 561
- The Secular Enlightenment. By Margaret C. Jacob.  
Reviewed by Tibor Bodnár-Király 565
- “Kedves Hazámfiái, mozdulni kell...” Georgikoni peregrinatio oeconomica  
a 19. század elején [“Dear fellow countrymen, we must move...” The technological  
journeys of Hungary’s first college of farming in the early nineteenth century].  
By György Kurucz. Reviewed by Gábor Gelléri 570
- Universities in Imperial Austria 1848–1918: A Social History of a Multicultural  
Space. By Surman, Jan. Reviewed by Katalin Stráner 573
- Slovutný pán prezident. Listy Jozefovi Tisovi [Your Honor, Mr. President:  
Letters to Jozef Tiso]. By Madeline Vadkerty. Reviewed by Denisa Nešťáková 577
- Budapest–Bergen-Belsen–Svájc: A Kasztner-vonat fővárosi utasai  
[Budapest–Bergen-Belsen–Switzerland: The Budapest passengers of  
the Kasztner train]. Edited by Anikó Lukács. Reviewed by Borbála Klacsmann 580
- Hóman Bálint és népbírósi pere [Bálint Hóman and his trial  
at the People’s Court]. Edited by Gábor Ujváry. Reviewed by Andrea Pető 583
- New Perspectives in Transnational History of Communism in East Central  
Europe. Edited by Krzysztof Brzechczyn. Reviewed by Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi 587
- Magyar-zsidó identitásmenták [Hungarian-Jewish identity patterns].  
Edited by Iván Zoltán Dénes. Reviewed by Attila Novák 591

New Perspectives in Transnational History of Communism in East Central Europe. Edited by Krzysztof Brzechczyn. *Dia-Logos* 26. Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, 2019. pp. 384.

*New Perspectives in Transnational History of Communism in East Central Europe*, edited by Krzysztof Brzechczyn, is the result of a renaissance in the research on the twentieth-century totalitarian systems in Central and Eastern Europe and an attempt to evaluate new theoretical proposals from various fields of study. It was published in 2019 as the twenty-sixth book in the Peter Lang series *Dia-Logos. Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*.

First, I should say that the very title promises to introduce new perspectives on the historiography of European communism. That promise is not easy to keep, especially with respect to such a well-established sphere of research. Although the subject matter has been examined in depth, it is obvious to me that there are still too few studies that go beyond the national perspective. An examination of a phenomenon like communism should not, by definition, be restricted to one historiography. It should be global and comparative.

Brzechczyn outlines precisely this perspective in his introductory remarks. He draws a clear distinction between transnational and comparative studies, and he argues convincingly that they are based on different premises. From the comparative approach, the existing national historiographies are assumed to be ready-made, independent beings, and they are compared by means of a derivative determination of the criteria for their evaluation. Such a concept can be developed with the use of the available material, and in that sense, it does not constitute an entirely new perspective, but it does make it possible, as it were, to put the existing descriptions in order and contextualize them (p.15).

Brzechczyn suggests that the transnational perspective is methodologically more challenging, as it requires one to forget the existence of borders and national differences in order to allow the consideration of communism as a global movement, and only then is the implementation of the discovered model analyzed in the particular context. The national aspect is not the original context here. On the contrary, it is the global perspective that makes it possible to define and understand the local situation. This intriguing assumption could rightly be termed a “new perspective.”

It is worth noting that that term was also used during the Third Annual Conference of the OSI–CEU *Comparative History Project. Comparative Studies of Communism: New Perspectives* (Budapest, May 27–29, 2010). It was also used in a

2009 book edited by Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka entitled *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*. It seems clear that Brzechczyn would like to enter this discussion.

Although making paths for new perspectives is theoretically fascinating, it is also practically complicated. It is not easy to “set aside” the context in which the researchers have been raised and educated and in which they have been working all their lives. Can they free themselves from their particularistic histories? When we look through the biographical notes about the authors, we see that many of them lived and worked in more than one national context. That is an interesting Central and Eastern European phenomenon, which explains the possibility of a sensible implementation of the project. We are just entering a time in which the generation which was not shaped or, at least, was not solely shaped by the experience of communism is undertaking the theoretical reinterpretation of this experience.

In the introduction, Brzechczyn rightly notes that in the nineteenth-century scientific European historiography, the nation state was a widely accepted foundation for research. The paradigm of the “national historiography” survived, in a more or less covert form, the whole twentieth century, and it turned out to be one of the most durable assumptions of narratives about the past. Brzechczyn considers this to be both a natural consequence of the emergence of nation states and a construct of the cultural politics of those states. There is no doubt that the book ties in with the trend in transnational studies, discernible since the beginning of the twenty-first century. On the other hand, Brzechczyn correctly points out that the greater popularity of such research has yet not led to a clear theoretical position on the phenomena under study.

Consequently, Brzechczyn draws the logical conclusion that the very definition of transnational history has become a research problem. In his view, some doubts can be dispelled by separating transnational history from comparative history (p.16). This perspective is then rationally explained in a convincing manner. Brzechczyn explains why transnational historiography has recently become so popular and why it was not possible before. He focuses, on the one hand, on the new generations of researchers and, on the other, on the technical possibilities created by the Internet. Brzechczyn points out three areas of transnational research: (1) totalitarization and de-totalitarization; (2) modernist theories; and (3) the history of everyday life. In his opinion, modernist concepts were the first metanarratives of the process of transnational interpretation of communism in Eastern Europe, and the differences between the natures of communism in Eastern and Western Europe were first noted in those narratives.

The research on totalitarianism and the history of everyday life is also a traditional element of the scholarship on communism in Eastern Europe. Brzechczyn openly agrees with Peter Apor's and Constantin Iordachi's views on the topic. However, these authors do not see the need to draw a clear distinction between the comparative and transnational approaches, and they appear to wish to enrich the former with the latter. Indeed, for many scholars, it seems as if transnational studies are to expand and continue the main assumptions of comparative history, despite some tension between the two approaches.

Brzechczyn points to the fundamental differences between the methodological assumptions of the transnational and comparative approaches. The latter has enjoyed an established position since Marc Bloch, but it is especially popular in contemporary research on communism. One reason for this boost in popularity is the inclusion of new strategies of transnational research to that methodology. At the same time, Brzechczyn argues for the actual existence of two separate approaches here (p.17). On the other hand, Brzechczyn's examples do not contradict directly the assumptions of comparative history.

The articles in the book are based on the papers from the 2014 conference (Poznań, October 16–17). They are essentially 16 independent texts written by various authors from different countries. This diversity makes it possible to preserve the interdisciplinary and transnational perspective, however, this comes at the cost of consistency, despite the editor's evident efforts to maintain it. One advantage is doubtless the very broad representation of most national historiographies of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Also, various topics are covered, and many postulated "new perspectives" are shown.

Brzechczyn indicates three ways in which the transnationality of the authors' approaches finds expression: (1) in the analysis of the usefulness of the theories and models characteristic of transnational studies; (2) in the research on the use of these methods; and (3) in the research carried out with the use of universal categories which may be effectively applied to many societies. It is easy to notice that point three belongs to the comparative perspective. This very perspective appears to dictate the tone of many fragments of the book, and it indicates how difficult it is to maintain the postulated sharp distinction between comparative and transnational research in practice.

The book consists of five parts. In the first three parts, the general subject matter (communism) is divided into three aspects: political (i), ideological (ii), and economic/social (iii), while the two last parts are called, respectively, the states and societies of Central and Eastern Europe (iv) and the memory and narratives about

the communism in Central and Eastern Europe (v). The texts are consistently impressive, but it seems that not all the authors share the editor's vision of the transnational perspective. Most of them focus on traditional descriptions which emphasize the historical specificity of the given country and nation, with references to comparative methods. In the remaining texts, the comparative method is assumed from the start and effectively applied. The transnationality of the methods and subject matter of research remains in the background, but we see that it is still more of an interesting idea with perspectives for the future than a specific, independent research program. Especially interesting are articles from Chapter Three offering new spheres for study from the transnational perspective: consumerism and emotion studies; and from Chapter Five that shows problems of transnationalism when challenged by official memory politics in Belarus and Ukraine.

To sum up, in most texts in the book, including Brzechczyn's article, transnational studies are not clearly separated from comparative studies. The book does not exhaust the topic of this mutual relation, but that is not the objective of researchers who propose new points of view. It shows, in theory and practice, that there is still much work to be done before we could consider the transnational perspective to be fully conceptualized and standardized. It is difficult to separate the comparative and transnational histories, which gives rise to the question as to whether the endeavor is even justified.

In this respect, the third chapter, which is devoted to consumerism, instills optimism, as it proves that such research is not only possible but, in some areas, necessary. In the fifth chapter, ambitious plans are made for further work on the transnational perspective in historiography, and the last two texts indicate the urgency of that work, which, after all, does not take place in a political vacuum. The historiography of Central and Eastern Europe remains as complicated as its history. This is another reason why we should appreciate this publication, which presents a very broad spectrum of the theoretical and practical problems awaiting new generations of researchers. There is still no unequivocal answer to the question about the relationship between transnational and comparative perspectives in that research. The discussion continues, and Brzechczyn and his coauthors have made an important contribution to that conversation. Altogether, they have provided a good introductory book for everyone interested in transnational perspective, especially from the methodological standpoint, and for the wide range of researchers who focus on the comparative history of European communism.

Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi  
University of Silesia



THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

## Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

## The Hungarian Historical Reviews

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## CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	A. PETŐ, A. M. SZABÓ, A. SZÉCSÉNYI	385
<i>Bor Forced Labor Service as Reflected in Diaries</i>	T. CSAPODY	391
<i>The Corporeal Continuation of the Holocaust: A Look at Miscarriages</i>	A. M. SZABÓ	408
<i>Place Attachment in a Concentration Camp: Bergen-Belsen</i>	H. HUHÁK	430
<i>Hungarian Holocaust Testimonies in Global Memory Frames</i>	E. JEGES	452
<i>Hillersleben: Spatial Experiences of a Hungarian Jew</i>	A. SZÉCSÉNYI	470
<i>Budapest Butchers, the Jewish Question, and Holocaust Survivors</i>	I. P. ÁDÁM	491
<i>The Government Commission for Abandoned Property and the Hungarian Jews</i>	B. KLACSMANN	512
<i>German Historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary</i>	F. LACZÓ	530



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