

Victim of History: Cardinal Mindszenty, a biography. By Margit Balogh. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022. 934 pp.

Margit Balogh's biography of Cardinal Mindszenty is providing a balanced and detailed (934 pages) narrative of his life based on an extraordinarily wide scope of primary documents from numerous archives in various parts of the world. Her biography is a translation of parts of the two-volume Hungarian monograph (more than 1,300 pages) that was published in 2015 in Budapest (Research Centre for the Humanities).

This monograph tells in nine long chapters and numerous sub-chapters (about 100) the various stages of Mindszenty's life. Chapter One begins with his childhood in a small village, followed by Chapter Two, which covers the 25 years he spent working as a teacher and priest in Zalaegerszeg. Chapter Three covers his tenure as bishop of Veszprém during the last years of World War II, when he was imprisoned by the right-wing Arrow Cross Movement, allied to Nazi Germany. Chapters Four and five recount his appointment to serve as Archbishop of Esztergom and Primate of the Catholic Church of Hungary and his first conflicts with the postwar government, the Communist Party, and the Soviet occupation army, when he became the leader of the anti-Communist opposition. Chapter Six deals in detail with his arrest, torture, and the staging of the show trial against him, followed by Chapter Seven, which covers the six years of imprisonment until he was liberated during the Revolution of 1956. The eighth tells of his 15-year stay as a "guest" of the US Legation (Embassy since 1967), where he had found refuge in 1956, and the complicated negotiations between the Vatican, the Hungarian Communist government, and the US concerning his departure. The final chapter narrates the last five years of Mindszenty's life in exile (Vienna) and his conflict with Pope Paul VI, which ended in his removal from the chair as archbishop in 1973. The book ends with brief conclusions.

The detailed narrative provided by this extraordinary biography of Mindszenty (born József Pehm) offers many fascinating insights into Hungarian history. For this review, I would like to select only a few of the less well-known parts of Mindszenty's life, since research has focused almost exclusively on the few years during which he served as primate of Hungary, between 1945 and his arrest in 1949, as well as his role in 1956.

In Balogh's account, we learn about Mindszenty's adventures in western Hungary, where he was prominent as a socially and politically active priest in the Horthy period, which spanned two and a half decades of his adult life.

Mindszenty is presented as an engaged parish pastor who organized Catholics for his cause, had a new church built, and opened schools and caritative institutions. He was a very skilled organizer who did not shy away from confrontation, almost reminiscent of the famous fictional Italian character Don Camillo, the antipode of the Communist mayor, Peppone. Mindszenty founded a press (Zrinyi Printing and Book-Selling Co.) and a newspaper in 1920–21 (*Zalamegyei Újság*) in order to spread the messages of his legitimist and irredentist tendencies and his criticisms of the Horthy regime (pp.39–40). In the mid-1920s, he actively supported a legitimist candidate of the opposition (p.70–75). In 1938, he celebrated the First Vienna Award and gave his open support to the Imrédy government before getting slowly alarmed about growing German influence in Hungary and the anti-clerical tendencies of Nazism (pp.86–89). During World War II, Pehm became Mindszenty, probably in protest against rising German influence (the name Pehm is etymologically rooted in the German word “Böhme” or bohemian), and he was appointed to serve as bishop of Veszprém. In this function, Mindszenty reacted to the beginning of the Holocaust in his dioceses. On June 7, 1944, the *Zalamegyei Újság* published a speech by Mindszenty in which he stated that the church has been “antisemitic,” but that she would defend all those who were baptized, because the church “cannot abandon natural law” and “without proven crime and legal judgement, the life of no-one can be taken away.” (p.118). But after almost all the Jews in the area had been deported to Auschwitz, Mindszenty admitted in a letter, “we could have done more and been more forceful” (p.120). A few months later, he was arrested by the Arrow Cross because he refused to take an oath and protested against the senseless prolongation of the war. This arrest was most probably one of the reasons why he was later selected to serve as archbishop of Esztergom and primate of Hungary, since it demonstrated to Pope Pius XII that Mindszenty would not shy away from personal sacrifice in a difficult time. Such was probably the “strong personality” the Pope was looking for in a country that had been occupied by a hostile, anti-Catholic army.

Other not so well-known episodes of Mindszenty’s life include the fifteen long years he spent in the legation (which only became an embassy in 1966) of the United States between his flight on November 4, 1956 and the day he left for Rome on September 28, 1971. Balogh reflects, as in other parts of the book, about the radically changed political, social, and cultural context in which the cardinal found himself and his ideas. Now, in a time of détente and negotiation between the United States, West Germany, and the Communist governments of the Soviet Union and its Central and Eastern European allies, his strict anti-

Communism seemed to be anachronistic. This was when Pope Paul VI, who had trouble understanding Mindszenty and his stubborn character, called him “a victim of history.”

This book is extremely significant not only for readers interested in twentieth-century Hungarian history, but also for those interested, more generally, in the history of the Cold War, as well as the diplomatic and church history of the twentieth century. No comparable biography of Cardinal Mindszenty exists in English. The scholarship and the analysis of his personality and the historical context are very sound, and the text is based on thorough, exemplary analysis. The documentation is comprehensive and of outstanding quality. This is now the standard biography of Cardinal Mindszenty. None of the numerous, mostly hagiographic or superficially critical books about his life can compare to the scholarly quality of this impressive study. Margit Balogh has written a profound and readable biography of one of the most fascinating figures of the twentieth century.

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