

War, Gender and Memory – Interdisciplinary Approaches to WWII in Hungarian History

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Andrea Pető has been working cross-disciplinarily between the fields of gender studies, Holocaust studies and memory studies for a long time. Thus, while the main topic of both her books is violence in Hungary during WWII, they concentrate on very different aspects of it and present a multitude of methodological and theoretical perspectives. *Das Unsagbare erzählen* (“Telling the Unspeakable”) focuses on sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers after Hungary’s “liberation,” while *The Forgotten Massacre* deals with a case of an “intimate murder,” that is, violence committed by Hungarians (allegedly led by a woman) against Hungarian Jews in an apartment building in the heart of Budapest in 1944. While the former presents an overview of the main theoretical approaches to, and the comparative historiography and memory of sexual violence, the latter is a microhistorical analysis of a local murderous crime.

Since they examine different aspects of wartime violence, the two volumes work with very different groups of sources as well. Because *Das Unsagbare erzählen* is a methodological and historiographical introduction to the study of sexual violence, it only sporadically refers to primary sources and does not analyse them in great detail. *The Forgotten Massacre*, by contrast, relies heavily on the close reading and analysis of archival sources and oral history interviews. While there is a crucial difference between the group of perpetrators (foreign vs. domestic) and victims (predominantly women vs. Jews), both books focus on the experiences of everyday people during WWII, making important contributions to this still understudied field of inquiry in military history. Despite the above-described differences between the two volumes, both highlight certain key aspects of wartime violence such as the role of gender and ethnicity, the process of transitional justice, as well as the development of public memory of, and memory politics relating to WWII.

In both books, Pető offers a nuanced analysis of the role of gender in relation to violence. She deconstructs the masculinity of war by bringing women’s histories to the forefront and simultaneously breaks up the stereotype of the male perpetrator and the female victim. The “protagonist” and main perpetrator of the story of *The Forgotten Massacre* is a woman, Piroška Dely, whom Pető had introduced already in her earlier work on female perpetrators in the Hungarian far-right Arrow Cross movement during WWII.[1] Born into a modest family in a poor part of Hungary in the mid-1910s, Dely later moved to the Hungarian capital to make a living. After she was married and had two children, she divorced (or possibly her husband died), and consequently, she had to support herself and her children alone. Pető argues that the collapse of the Hungarian state administration in the aftermath of the German invasion and Arrow Cross takeover of power in October 1944 offered Dely the possibility to take advantage of the situation and rob persecuted Jews living in nearby apartment buildings. At the postwar people’s tribunal, her trial became one of the most high-profile cases and she was eventually sentenced to death as a member of the Arrow Cross Party – despite not actually being a member – on 19 counts of murder. The court procedure thus had a decidedly political orientation which led to her execution in 1946. As Pető points out, Dely was one of only seven women in Hungary who were sentenced to death as war criminals but her connections to the far right were by no means unique; for unskilled women supporting themselves (and frequently, their families) through work in precarious and unsecure work environments in interwar Hungary, it was often only

the far right which presented viable political answers. Leftist political forces that might have had an appeal to women like Dely had been sidelined, blamed for the territorial losses Hungary had suffered after WWI. Nevertheless, while the socio-economic position afforded to Dely because of her gender may have been a primary element in the nature of her crimes, similar crimes committed by other women remained invisible because they could not be linked to the far right by the tribunal. In the post-war process of transitional justice, the political dimension completely displaced the issue of female perpetrators.

In the case of sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers in Hungary during WWII, Pető also nuances the common understanding of wartime violence against women as the vengeance of the male victor over the defeated male through destroying his “property” (the woman). She argues that several factors had to be present for mass sexual violence to happen. These included the will for personal revenge because of the earlier deeds of the enemy (e.g. Hungary remaining Nazi Germany’s ally up until the failed attempt by governor Miklós Horthy to switch sides); prolonged and bloody fighting; and a huge and unregulated army. Furthermore, Pető suggests that the collapse of Hungarian state administration deprived victims of the forum where they could have turned to for justice, and contributed to the ensuing silence about sexual violence. The Allied Control Commission, under whose jurisdiction crimes committed by Red Army soldiers fell, was reluctant to persecute sexual offenders.

Clearly, the control of transitional justice had a decisive influence on how acts of violence were narrated (or silenced) in the aftermath of WWII. This situation led to the production of the events’ unified narratives through acts of witnessing and a kind of institutionalized process of mourning. In the case of violence against Jews, the sheer volume of cases to be processed and discourse of consolidation that dominated the language of the courtroom did not allow for the thorough examination of the motives of the crime. Pető clearly shows that witnesses themselves tried to stir Piroska Dely’s murder case towards political motivation to ensure that she got sentenced because a simple financially motivated robbery and murder would not have yielded the same results. The prosecution of war crimes by Red Army soldiers would have been neither easy nor politically prudent. Thus, in both cases, transitional justice simultaneously restricted, in extreme situations prevented the victims from articulating their own narratives of violence even though it represented the only forum to talk about it.

Pető also looks at new and old narratives around mass sexual violence in Hungary. Wartime fears of the Red Army were based on the perception of Soviet soldiers as different and strange, and thus their crimes were attributed in the public imagination to ethnic differences – something the “barbaric East” committed against a “civilized and Christian West.” Yet by comparing episodes of sexual violence by the Red Army committed in Hungary with those elsewhere, Pető convincingly shows that it would be erroneous to interpret it as a civilizational or ethnic conflict. Red Army soldiers did not commit sexual violence everywhere, and definitely not to the same extent as they did in Hungary; for example, the same units that occupied Hungary committed significantly less sexual violence in Yugoslavia. Furthermore, soldiers of Allied Armies also committed mass sexual violence (for example French troops from Morocco in Germany). According to Pető, the unsilencing of women’s stories of sexual violence during WWII happened in Hungary, and to some extent in Poland, only after the recent “illiberal turn” in memory politics. As a result, the narrative framework of these crimes

became solely martyrology and national victimhood. The story of female victims was fitting this framework; however, these nationalist narratives presented women (like the national body) exclusively in the one-dimensional role of victims, ignoring the violent crimes committed against Jews or other minorities by local women like Dely.

In both volumes, Pető repeatedly highlights the problem of WWII memory and memory politics relating to it. This field of inquiry has received increased attention in the past few years, first because of the memory rifts between Eastern and Western European countries within the EU, and then, as a result of Russia's securitization of the memory of WWII with which it has aimed to justify its various military incursions into Ukraine since 2014. By contrast, Baltic and Eastern European countries have long tried to propagate the interpretation of WWII and the onslaught by Nazi Germany as simply the first of two occupations, the second being the period after WWII from the arrival of the Red Army until the collapse of communism. This double occupation, and as a consequence, double national victimhood under Nazi and the Soviet occupation is a central element of what Pető terms illiberal memory politics. The discreditation of the Communist era allowed for some perpetrators of wartime violence to relativize the events of WWII and portray themselves in the role of victims. During Pető's interview with the second generation, for example, the son of the Csengery street building's janitor, who had also been a partner in Dely's crimes, referred to his father's suffering during Communism as a "cover story" to avoid facing responsibility for crimes committed by Hungarians upon their neighbours during WWII. Local perpetrators are seen as victims within the frameworks of illiberal memory politics both in Hungary and in Poland, which has impacted tremendously the official memory of WWII and the Holocaust in both countries, leading to a "competition of the victims" and, as Pető has argued elsewhere[2], hijacking the memory politics of the Holocaust.

Though it is sometimes a challenge to follow the extensive quotes and the multiple theoretical angles they contain, both books offer new and complex perspectives on wartime violence. When read together, they offer complementary theoretical and methodological approaches to study its causes. Pető's analysis of the implications of contemporary memory politics on the development of the memory of sexual violence and the Holocaust in Hungary make these volumes indispensable for those working in the fields of gender studies, Holocaust studies and memory studies.

Notes:

[1] Andrea Pető, *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party. Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in the Second World War*, Cham 2020.

[2] Andrea Pető, *The Illiberal Memory Politics in Hungary*, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 24 (2022), pp. 241–249.