Introduction by the Special Editor

The emerging scholarly interest in the Holocaust in Hungary after 1989 was coincident with the increasingly transnational framing of Holocaust research. Since the fall of communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe, historians of the Holocaust have not only aimed to situate the genocide of European Jews in its diverse local and national contexts, but also depicted it as a mass crime to which non-German perpetrators made substantial or even decisive contributions. The Holocaust in Hungary has clearly emerged as a case in point when it comes to the multifaceted and profound involvement of the local state and society. Accordingly, in recent years historians and social scientists have been exploring a broad variety of themes and local sources related to this last major chapter of the continent-wide genocide. Applying contemporary methods, they have come to suggest novel and intriguing approaches to contextualization. However, the Holocaust in Hungary arguably has not yet been given adequate attention in the international historiography.

These considerations prompted The Hungarian Historical Review to devote its present issue to the findings of current research initiatives which place the Holocaust in Hungary in diverse contexts. András Szécsényi’s “Development and Bifurcation of an Institution. The Voluntary Labor Service and the Compulsory National Defense Labor Service of the Horthy Era” provides a thorough examination of the emergence and transformation of the institution of labor service in Hungary, an institution infamously responsible in part for the segregation and mass murder of Hungarian Jews during World War II prior to 1944. Szécsényi’s study places the history of this institution into broader geographical and temporal frames, showing in detail how what had been a voluntary system in the second half of the 1930s was made compulsory and how in the context of anti-Semitic radicalization between 1939 and 1941 the labor service system increasingly became two separate systems. Exploring another key form of anti-Jewish discrimination and exclusion prior to 1944, Gábor Szegedí’s “Stand by Your Man. Honor and Race Defilement in Hungary, 1941–1944” draws on the growing interest in the history of emotions and analyzes Hungary’s 1941 turn to racist sexual politics. Highlighting notable links to the Nuremberg laws while also exploring remarkable differences from them, Szegedí’s study of court cases dissects the conceptions and functions of “feminine,” “Jewish” and “national honor.”
Szécsényi’s and Szegedi’s in-depth analyses are followed by three case studies on the main phase of the Holocaust in Hungary in the spring and summer of 1944. Regina Fritz’s “Inside the Ghetto: Everyday Life in Hungarian Ghettos” starts from the premise that ghettoization in Hungary was not a uniform process and the exact shape ghettos took depended largely on local authorities. In addition to presenting formal differences between these comparatively short-lived ghettos, the study draws on various surviving personal documents to explore the daily lives of persecuted Jews inside them. Attila Gidó’s “The Hungarian Bureaucracy and the Administrative Costs of the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania” and Anders Blomqvist’s “Local Motives for Deporting Jews. Economic Nationalizing in Szatmárnémeti in 1944” both examine the considerations that motivated perpetrators, offering case studies on the history of 1944 from Northern Transylvania. Drawing on critical theories of modern statehood, Gidó’s research meticulously reconstructs the key tasks created by ghettoization and deportation for the Hungarian bureaucracy on a regional level and thereby shows the profound “professional” involvement of state agencies in the administration of genocide. Anders Blomqvist’s contribution grapples with the question of the motivations of perpetrators and beneficiaries in the city of Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare). The author distinguishes various types and levels of material involvement while also clearly underlining how broad segments of local society were implicated in the persecution of the city’s Jews through their support of a radical program of “economic re-Hungarianization.”

Kinga Frojimovics and Éva Kovács’s “Jews in a ‘Judenrein’ City: Hungarian Jewish Slave Laborers in Vienna (1944–1945)” provides novel insights into the experiences of Hungarian Jewish slave laborers in Vienna, a little known chapter of the Holocaust coinciding with the late stages of World War II. Drawing on an ongoing project to reconstruct, re-localize and commemorate these experiences, the article not only makes creative use of oral history sources but also clarifies key features of what its authors call “the Vienna paradox.” Kata Bohus’ “Not a Jewish Question? The Holocaust in Hungary in the Press and Propaganda of the Kádár Regime during the Trial of Adolf Eichmann” in turn broadens the chronological scope of the issue to the postwar period. Drawing on its author’s in-depth research into the attitudes and policies of communist-ruled Hungary to its Jewish population and the newly created state of Israel, Bohus dissects the ideological framing of Holocaust history and the contested nature of Holocaust remembrance under János Kádár, but also reveals a rather high
degree of simultaneous responses to the Eichmann trial that at times challenged the official framing of 1944–45.

This thematic issue of *The Hungarian Historical Review* thus covers a wide range of topics, including the underexplored origins of the Hungarian labor service in the mid-1930s, the ideologically charged reception of the first major trial focusing on the Holocaust in the early 1960s, the history of human emotions, the “cold” history of a bureaucracy, the economic motivation and involvement of local perpetrators, and the specific experiences of Hungarian Jewish ghetto dwellers in various ghettos and slave laborers in an unfamiliar and inhospitable metropolis. Offering several new perspectives and the findings of an array of research initiatives, the issue ultimately hopes to foster further attempts at broader contextualization of key facets of the prehistory, implementation, and aftermath of the Holocaust in Hungary.

Ferenc Laczó