

Hadifoglyok, dezertőrök – Magyar katonák az olasz háttérországban (1915–1920) [Prisoners of war, deserters: Hungarian soldiers in the Italian hinterland]. By Balázs Juhász. Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 2022. 535. pp.

The recent book by Balázs Juhász deals with the living conditions of Hungarian soldiers who were captured by the Italian army during World War I. Juhász is an assistant professor at Eötvös Loránd University and has written numerous articles about the Italian front and its relationship with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His recent monograph aims for a wide audience while also contributing to more focused academic discussion.

Although historians have written a fair amount concerning several aspects of POW life, Juhász's monograph is important in part simply because of his unique research methods. He goes beyond the existing secondary literature by drawing on a wider array of sources: in addition to the Hungarian scholarly literature, he has also used several documents from Italian archives. His book is highly relevant, given that no synthesis has been published on the history of Hungarian POWs since the 1930s.

The book has eleven chapters in addition to the preface and conclusion, and it can be divided thematically into three main parts. The first part presents the general conditions and management of the Italian POW camps. Juhász emphasizes that the first and second Hague Conventions (1899, 1907) were valid during World War I. Since the terms of these conventions applied to the Italian army, the Spanish embassy and the Pope supervised their observance. In addition, state organizations such as the Italian Red Cross Prisoner of War Committee and the Prisoner of War Committee (set up by the Ministry of Defense) also operated to maintain the structure of the POW camps. Although it became clear at the beginning of the war that Italy was not prepared for a large number of incoming prisoners, the capacity of the camps increased only slowly during the war. This had a huge impact on the events of November 1918, as the Italian army suddenly had to accommodate approximately 300,000 prisoners after the Armistice of Villa Giusti (also known as the Padua Armistice). From the perspective of the lives of the individual soldiers, the armistice seems to have been the most significant trauma for the Hungarian POWs. Juhász emphasizes that it is very difficult to determine the exact number of POWs in Italy, but as far as the sources permit us to venture an estimate, a maximum of 477,000 people were under the control of the Italian army. This number includes soldiers

captured during combat operations as well as deserters (whose number on the Italian front was not significant). With regard to the conditions in the camp, Juhász offers details concerning accommodation, clothing, finances, catering, culture, and leisure. Although the Italians drew a significant distinction between officers and regular soldiers in most respects, the living conditions of the latter were relatively tolerable. At the same time, some Hungarian POWs lived under worse conditions, especially those who had been brought from the Serbian front (1914–1915) via Albania to the Italian island of Asinara. Despite the fact that the story of Asinara is generally known in Italian historiography, narratives of the events which took place at the POW camp on the island often differ strikingly. According to Juhász, the process of bringing the POWs from Serbia to Asinara could justifiably be referred to as a “death march,” but the exact number of soldiers who died due to frost, typhus, and cholera remains unknown. The first group of POWs reached Asinara in December 1915, but the real nightmare had only just begun, due to the extreme inadequacy of the camp (lack of water, inadequate supplies, and no suitable medical care). Although these problems remained issues on the island in the long term, more and more POWs arrived in Asinara in 1916 and 1918. The story of “Donkey-island” ended only after the return home of those who survived in 1922.

In the second part of the book, Juhász presents the most important features of life in the camp, such as the opportunities that prisoners were given to contact their relatives, the compulsory work regimen, and the healthcare that was provided for them. Juhász emphasizes that the postal services provided the most significant connection with the outside world, not only for the POWs but also for the guards. Nevertheless, there were many cases of abuse. In addition to being able to open and read the letters, the censors could also decide which packages were urgent. Sometimes, they robbed the POWs: they kept food or other things that had been sent to the POWs from the hinterland. Although the exact number of letters and packages that were sent cannot be determined, those which have survived offer excellent sources for historians due to their unique content. Working conditions were also an important issue. Juhász examines the question of POW labor in the larger context of the Italian economy. While officers and commissioned officers were prohibited from working, regular soldiers were paid for their work. This is related to the fact that there was a labor shortage in Italian agriculture from 1916. However, POWs were employed not only in agriculture (afforestation, agronomy) but also in industry (the extraction of energy sources) and in infrastructure development (roadworks and the construction of dams and

railways). In Italy, they were used in a wide variety of geographical areas, such as Sardinia, Sicily, southern Italy, Lazio, Toscana, Piemont, Lombardia, and Venetia. Juhász reflects on the Italian healthcare system regarding the physical and mental condition of POWs. Although a four-week quarantine was mandatory for all incoming prisoners, various epidemics (cholera, typhus, malaria) often spread among them. As not all epidemics became known, infections often put the lives of civilians at risk. Healthcare conditions deteriorated significantly in 1918 due to the spread of the Spanish flu. In addition to physical illnesses, POWs also suffered mental illnesses. Juhász emphasizes that doctors could only treat those POWs who were sent to mental hospitals, as doctors did not visit the camps, so early and local treatment of depression was not possible.

The third part of the book deals with the various ways in which POWs could leave the camps. There were POW exchanges, for instance, which were used in particular for POWs who were deemed seriously ill. As they were unable to fight because of disease or injury, they became burdens for the guards. Though the first agreement concerning POW exchanges was reached in the spring of 1916, concrete results were only ratified in the second part of the year. There were also exchanges of soldiers above the age of 60, as well as civilians who had been interned, medical staff, priests, pastors, and theologians. The battle of Caporetto, which lasted from October 24 until November 19, 1917, only meant a short pause, as this form of “human exchange” was soon underway again. Another possibility to leave the camps was escaping. Naturally, the motivations that might prompt a prisoner to attempt an escape were different. They included the threat of suffering physical harm as well as problems related to accommodation, lack of heating, mistreatment or abuse, and personal motivations (the desire for freedom and a prisoner’s concerns for the fate of his family).

Two factors support the fact that the escape of POWs appeared in the Italian camps. First, the POWs were not actually paid in Italian currency. Rather, they were paid in a currency (“camp-money”) only valid in the camp itself. (Namely, POWs could spend Italian currency when they tried to get home.) Secondly, news related to POW escapes was censored in the press. Finally, the issue of nationality was also a factor. The Italian authorities divided the POWs into two main groups based on their nationality: Slavs and Romanians on the one hand and Austrians and Hungarians on the other. With this, the Italians sought to avoid conflicts between POWs and also wanted to give them a chance to switch to the other side. However, only soldiers who had nothing to lose switched to the Italian side, as this act could put the lives of their family members in

danger. Although five national minority legions consisting of former POWs were formed in Italy (Yugoslav, Albanian, Polish, Romanian, and Czechoslovak), the recruitment efforts among the soldiers of the Habsburg Monarchy were not a great success. Also, the real trauma came at the end of the war, as from November 1918, the Italians had to guard an enormous number of POWs. Nevertheless, in the first few months of 1919, the Italian government tried to keep POWs from going home. In doing so, the government sought to ensure that it would be impossible for authorities outside the country to monitor the general state of POWs and also that POWs would be unable to return to the new countries of Central Eastern Europe to serve as soldiers. As a result, POWs were also employed in 1919 for various purposes (filling trenches, preparing land for agricultural work, etc.). After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the crisis was finally resolved by the interests of the great powers. In August 1919, POWs began to be allowed to return home in order to strengthen the relationship between Hungary and Italy.

One of the biggest advantages of Juhász's book is that it provides a unique insight into the rather underresearched history of POWs in Italy during World War I. Due to Juhász's unique approach, methodology, and sources, his book is relevant to an international audience. Especially notable is the fact that he gives a voice to low-ranking soldiers. The explanations, tables, list of names, list of geographical lists, and rich illustrations also make the book engaging and relevant. At the same time, I would venture a few critical remarks. It is regrettable, for instance, that the tables, which offer a useful complement to the narrative, are found at the end of the book. Also, in some cases, the explanations Juhász provides of problems related to the lives and fates of POWs are burdensomely detailed, for instance, his discussion of work done by POWs in different Italian geographical areas which, with a few exceptions, does not contain any new information.

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