László Borhi: Survival Under Dictatorships. Life and Death in Nazi and Communist Regimes. Budapest–Vienna–New York: Central European University Press, 2024. 374 pp.

This is an outstanding book by an outstanding historian. What does a historian need to become an outstanding scholar who produces outstanding works? The factors shaping this process include a combination of a curious personality capable of putting individual and family experiences into a broader context and a well-defined research question that is challenging both for the author and his/her professional circle and also of interest to the wider public. Furthermore, in order to compose a major contribution to the field, a historian must have access to essential sources, skills in source criticism, and institutions that are supportive both in terms of funding research and helping with the process of publication.

Since the beginning of his career during the late 1980s (he graduated from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in 1986), Hungarian historian László Borhi has been trying to understand and help his readers understand the historical factors that shaped Hungary's fate after World War II. These factors included the impacts of fascism, national socialism, communism and Stalinism, the making of the Soviet Bloc, and policies of Western Europe and the US towards the dictatorships in Eastern and Central Europe. These issues were not just academic problems for him. They were, rather, personal questions, as he had grown up in this world. He sought to arrive at a more subtle grasp of Hungary's place in the conflicts between the competing superpowers. Personal as these questions might have been, it is a task of the scholar to turn them into research projects, and Borhi did and is doing this with impressive efficiency. His work was strongly supported by the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which around the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries initiated a large-scale research project titled *Hungary in the Soviet Bloc and the Regime Change 1945–1990*. This project included the publication of chronologies, source publications, and monographs, and Borhi excelled in each of these genres. He began with a chronology (*Az Egyesült Államok és a szovjet zóna. 1945-1990*, Budapest, 1994), continued with a thick volume of sources on US-Hungarian relations between 1945 and 1990 (*Magyar-amerikai kapcsolatok 1945–1990. Források,* Budapest, 2009) and then wrote three monographs (*Hungary in the Cold War 1945–1956. Between the United States and the Soviet Union*, Budapest and New York, 2004; *Nagyhatalmi érdekek hálójában. Az Egyesült Államok és Magyarország kapcsolata a második világháborútól a rendszerváltásig*, Budapest, 2015; and *Dealing with*

Dictators: The United States, Hungary and East Central Europe, 1942–1989, Indiana University Press, 2017). Based on a very extensive source exploration of a vast array of sources, he compared the policies of the dictatorial Soviet Union and those of the democratic United States towards Hungary during and after World War II. In this series of books, Borhi makes a persuasive argument in support of the idea that Hungary's history was determined by the conflicting interests of the rulers of the Cold War world.

After decades of research dedicated to the history of international relations, Borhi shifted his interest towards a different aspect of the history of dictatorships. From the top, he moved to the bottom, which is to say that he began looking for sources that shed light on the survival strategies used by various layers of Hungarian society from 1944 to 1953. His motivations were again personal and professional. His family mourned a grandfather and an uncle who never returned from Buchenwald. But his mother and grandmother survived in part because they followed the advice of an Arrow Cross man. The history of dictatorships includes many such complex events. Survival frequently depended on a decision taken within seconds. How do people behave in such extremely tense situations? How do systems shape the individual and how do individuals shape the system? Borhi also poses the question in a less scholarly way: do "shitty" people make "shitty" times or do "shitty" times make "shitty" people? These are general questions that can be asked in connection with numerous other historical situations as well. This book presents a series of powerful case studies trying to answer these difficult questions. It analyses a time span of less than eight years. Under consolidated circumstances, a period of eight years means continuity. A child can turn into a young adult by graduating from high school, for instance. Another eight years can bear witness to the start of a great career and the start of a family. Between 1944 and 1953, circumstances were changing at an incredibly fast pace in Hungary and the book focuses on three subperiods: the deportation and murder of Hungarian Jews in Nazi work and death camps (April 1944 to the liberation of these camps in early 1945), the terrorist reign of the Arrow Cross people (the Hungarian Nazis) in Budapest from mid-October 1944 to early February 1945, and the Hungarian experience of Stalinism from about mid-1948 to the spring of 1953. The book does not give a comprehensive history of Hungary over the course of these eight years. Still, it might have been interesting to look at the survival strategies used by various layers of Hungarian society during the roughly three years of a limited pluralism between about mid-1945 to

about mid-1948 as well. That, however, would have definitely called for different methods and different sources.

The most important novelty of the book is the focus on survival strategies when investigating the functioning of Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships. Borhi defines survival strategies as a neglected, grey area between collaboration and resistance. The concept also helps him take sides concerning the top-down and bottom-up models of Stalinism. He argues that the two models of Stalinism "in the Hungarian case are not mutually exclusive but mutually complementary. Survival as a concept is a bridge between the two narratives" (p.359). Indeed, this is a useful analytical concept that can be applied to victims, perpetrators, and onlookers alike, since, as circumstances changed, as they did at an extremely rapid pace during the period discussed by Borhi, former victims might take revenge and turn into perpetrators and some former perpetrators became their victims. Willingly or unwillingly, former onlookers often found themselves in the position of either victim or perpetrator. The basic frame of the well-structured presentation of the carefully selected numerous case studies is the oppressive role of the state and the relationship between the state and the various groups of survivors. This is a logical and properly substantiated approach from the perspective of the real and potential victims. Still, as the book points out, during the second subperiod, the Arrow Cross terror in Budapest, the collapse of the Hungarian central state power allowed for the most violent and often only loosely coordinated acts of cruelty by of smaller Arrow Cross gangs targeting defenseless Jews. Borhi argues that under these circumstances, survival was a collaborative effort, whereas in the Nazi work and death camps survival was determined more by individual efforts. In this uncontrolled environment, various patterns of behavior could take the most extreme forms, including empathic solidarity and extreme sadism. Perpetrators were driven by greed, ideologies, and ethnic and social prejudices. The case studies show how these factors, either individually or mixed, could generate the most violent agency. During the two other subperiods, when the Hungarian state was able to function properly, highly centralized brutality and cruelty set more limits to individual choices. This is how in about seven weeks starting mid-April 1944, 437,000 Hungarian Jews could be deported to concentration camps. The Stalinist state developed perhaps the most sophisticated mechanism of terror, where truly no one (including top level leaders) could feel safe. This takes us to the other key concept in the book: fear which, together with anxiety, permeates all social layers in dictatorships, and Hungary was no exception. Fear determines not only the mindset of victims

but also drives perpetrators, because they frequently assume that if they do not destroy their real or assumed enemies, they will be defeated by them. Stalinist systems take this view to the most dramatic extreme. As Borhi argues, "[i]f Hitler had had his way, Germany would have rid itself of its 'enemies' by deporting or killing them all. In Stalinist systems, where the constant intensification of terror was enshrined as a law, the supply of enemies was unending" (p.276). Borhi integrates the concept of hope into his analysis as well, however, arguing that it was hope that sustained the will to survive the Nazi and Stalinist machineries of oppression. For some people, hope was sustained by the prospect of liberation by foreign armies. For others, it was kept alive by the notion that there was a better world on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Borhi draws on an array of sources, including interviews with Holocaust survivors conducted in the immediate aftermath of the war, court documents of trials against perpetrators, letters, diaries, and even works of art and literature. He takes sides in the debate concerning the reliability of interviews with survivors. He agrees with Gábor Gyáni, who points out that "the history of the Holocaust can be explained rationally but it cannot be comprehended. This not only allows but requires us to place the human voice and human experience on an equal footing with the insights of the historian if the scholar of the past seeks to narrate an event of the magnitude of the Holocaust." (p.8). The cases reconstructed on the basis of these sources offer narratives which might well bear comparison with pointillist paintings. In a pointillist painting, the many small dots created a unified image when viewed from the proper perspective, and this is similar to the experience of the reader who consults the interviews with survivors. Another strength of the book is that it persuasively shows, by drawing on numerous examples, how hatreds can transcend political systems and also how deeply rooted individual and group passions can connect to more abstract state involving ideologies of hatred driven by centralized power.

Borhi argues that no comparable book is available in the extremely rich secondary literature on the history of these dictatorships. I think that at least two works very well known and appreciated by Borhi have to be mentioned here as a comparison. The first is Timothy Snyders *Bloodlands* (Borhi wrote an extensive review on it in the third issue of this journal in 2014), which admittedly puts greater emphasis on the forms of destruction but which, like Borhi's book, also considers the motivations of the perpetrators. Borhi accepts Snyder's point that Stalin's war was not a crusade against tyranny but a life and death struggle for the survival of his regime and targeted both class enemies

and ethnic minorities. Where Borhi substantially disagrees with Snyder is that Stalin's murderous policies were not comprehensible simply in terms of an ideologically determined class struggle. For Snyder the Soviet Union was not guided by ideology. Borhi, however, convincingly argues that in the Soviet Union and in countries of the Soviet Bloc, the societies were permeated with the basic tenets of communist ideology: a strong belief in the historical necessity of overcoming the retrograde imperialist powers by all possible means. Borhi does not accept Snyder's notion of "Ersatz victory," i.e., the idea that, when the plans for a transformative utopia of the dictatorship of the proletariat failed, a policy of mass murder was proclaimed as a kind of "substitute victory." The deaths of millions of victims were not, Borhi argues, simply collateral damage or events of secondary significance. On the contrary, for Hitler and Stalin, these deaths were their primary goal. These problems are essential in the interpretation of the numerous case studies in the book. Borhi strongly disagrees with the view that a blind belief in a radical ideology can absolve perpetrators of their individual responsibility. This is perhaps the most important message of the book: "The events described in the book were not guided by invisible historical sources or cogwheels in a machine. They were determined by people who were capable of unspeakable atrocities or selfless deeds of good. Human decency was a choice even in the hardest of times" (p.360).

The other historian whose work merits comparison with Borhi's book is István Deák, in particular his book *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution During World War II*. Both in this book (which was, sadly, his last) and in many of his other writings, Deák gives numerous examples of how complex the concepts of collaboration and resistance are. Resistance might bring weaken the enemy, but it might prompt vicious acts of revenge, whereas collaboration might help survival. Deák masterfully explains how the same person or group could play both a hero and enemy role for various socially, ethnically, and religiously differing groups, but this never leads him to bottomless relativism. Some of the cases Borhi presents challenge the wildest images of sadism, but just as Deák does, Borhi always finds counterexamples and shows the complexities. Deák deals more with larger scale events, such as high-level decision-making processes, while Borhi's focus is more on a vast number of micro-stories, but Deák's descending hierarchy of collaboration, cooperation, and accommodation can be applied to these case studies as well. One example presented by Borhi in great detail is that of Oszkár Brenner, tried in the last trial of Arrow Cross criminals in 1971, after having been acquitted by the People's

Tribunal in1947. Brenner was a successful entrepreneur who hired and hid a number of Jews but also joined an Arrow Cross group and participated in the atrocities committed by this group. In his trial, he argued that he had done this to save his business and the Jews under his protection. After citing numerous witness reports concerning the complexity of Brunner's behavior, Borhi summarizes the story as follows: "Was he a war criminal, a rescue angel or some of both? We may never know for sure" (p.187). Another story concerning the complexity of rescue given detailed treatment in the book is about the convent of the Sisters of Divine Love. Only some of the Jewish children hidden in this building could be saved. For the parents of the children who were saved, the nuns were angels. Those whose children were not saved, in contrast, demanded serious punishment of the sisters after the war. Borhi examines the behavior of one of the nurses as a paradigmatic example of a dilemma that many people in crisis situations had to face: unwillingness to lie due to their Christian faith, but at the same time, this faith motivated them to help. Borhi devotes considerable attention to denunciations and points out that, whereas in democracies respect for the law serves as the glue which holds society together, "[u]nder National Socialist or communist rule, obeying the law may not always have been a virtue. Citizens who break the law may be more virtuous than those who obey laws requiring denunciation and persecution" (p.273). This is a point that is relevant to an understanding of all types of authoritarian systems. We often consider respect for the rule of law a pillar of democracy but, the rule of inhuman laws can challenge basic moral norms. Both Deák and Borhi observe that none of the available sources suggest that guards and other persons who worked in the service of oppressive regimes were punished when they were lenient in their treatment of prisoners or members of persecuted groups. Group psychology, however, confirms that people can turn into unwilling perpetrators when they do not want to lose the sympathy or support of their comrades. The atmosphere of a community spirit might be a more effective tool with which to enforce discipline than the prospect of punishment.

The analysis of levels of cruelty and possible motivations behind acts of cruelty helps Borhi paint a picture of many shades. Orders can be followed loosely or strictly, and victims can sometimes be better put to use if they are treated decently. Belief in a cause that offers the promise of redemption and the fear that if we do not destroy the declared enemy the enemy may destroy us are hatreds that can drive violent aggression.

How could we point out the most important scholarly achievements of this truly outstanding book? Drawing on a vast array of primary sources concerning the history of three Hungarian dictatorial systems, László Borhi approaches the functioning of totalitarian dictatorships from the deep layers of society. The secondary literature will certainly use his numerous case studies for comparative investigations. His investigation of the Arrow Cross terror in Budapest in particular, which rests on Hungarian sources which have hardly been used and which are not accessible to anyone who does not read Hungarian, offers penetrating insights into the very deep levels of the human condition. It describes intersections of individual and institutional evil. As I have already mentioned, an investigation of survival strategies during the period of limited political pluralism between 1945 and 1948 could be an interesting avenue for the continuation of the survival strategies project, and in the longer run, the same applies to the early Kádár period. Borhi presents a plethora of complex situations, but his conclusions are always straightforward. He rejects the notion that dictatorships were also built on a deal between perpetrators and victims. Still, he admits that many average people living under dictatorial systems could fall under the spell of totalitarian ideologies, and even some inmates in the Nazi concentration camps internalized Nazi ideology. The book is an emotionally challenging read, as the reader must confront numerous stories of extreme cruelty, but its ultimate message is optimistic: even in the most critical situations, there were always some people who found the ways and means to avoid complicity.

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