

**Pető, Andrea. 2018: *Elmondani az elmondhatatlant: A nemi erőszak története Magyarországon a II. világháború alatt* ['Speaking of the Unspeakable: The Story of Sexual Violence in Hungary During World War II']. Budapest: Jaffa. 279 pp.**

**Reviewed by Agatha Schwartz<sup>1</sup>, University of Ottawa, Canada**

No one is better qualified to have written this book than distinguished Hungarian historian and Professor at CEU Andrea Pető, who has extensively researched wartime sexual violence in Hungary and published on this topic for about two decades. The present volume both sums up and expands the author's research regarding sexual violence by Soviet armed forces in Hungary, which she presents within a comparative framework, highlighting common points and differences regarding the writing and memory of sexual violence in Hungary compared to Austria and Germany and to a number of other historical contexts both in Europe and beyond (e.g., Korea). The author's analysis is based on her extensive archival research, interviews with survivors (some of which she conducted herself), publications by other scholars, published literary and personal accounts (including Russian translations), visual materials, films and Internet sources. Pető's main point of inquiry is twofold: 1) to understand the public discourse created around this particular historical episode of wartime mass sexual violence and the politics of its memorialization, and 2) to reflect on the difficulties of representing and memorializing sexual violence and on how to break the vicious circle that continues to perpetuate the victims' silence and silencing mechanisms.

Although sexual violence in conflict has been a well-known historical fact since times immemorial and documented in many wars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (i.e. the "rape of Nanking," the rapes during the Vietnam War and the Indian partition, and systematic mass rapes in Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, the Philippines, Rwanda, Mozambique, Sudan, Uganda, former Yugoslavia, the Congo, Syria, and the list – sadly – could go on), it was attention by the media and the international intervention following the mass rapes in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the mid-1990s that finally gave this "by-product" of war the long-overdue legal and scholarly attention. In Hungary, as Pető argues, the memory of the rapes perpetuated by the Soviets during World War II became a "hot" memory (Charles Maier's term) after 1989, i.e., after the fall of the communist system. Following the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a new vocabulary was

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created that subsequently enabled a new discussion of other historical episodes of sexual violence, including the one that had happened in the author's own country.

In her methodologically and theoretically nuanced discussion of this "hot" topic, Pető skilfully avoids the traps and limits of the two dominant interpretation models in talking about sexual violence, meaning the so-called intentionalist approach (i.e., contrasting the victimized national body, the "us," with the "other" evil ethnic group) and the structuralist approach (i.e., seeing sexual violence as a fundamental structural component in the maintenance of male power over women). While Pető does not dispute the fact that the Soviet armed forces were responsible for the rape of many Hungarian women (as well as the rape of many other women across Eastern and Central Europe), she presents a more complex picture of sexual violence in World War II that takes into account research data regarding the sexual misconduct and atrocities of other armed forces as well, including the Hungarian and German forces. Pető thus convincingly deconstructs the dominant image in Hungarian public memory (reinforced by the current political climate and discourse in Hungary) that puts all emphasis on creating and maintaining an orientalized image of the "evil barbarians" from the East who raped and plundered, things that the "more civilized" Hungarians and Germans allegedly did not do.

The author's reliance on a comparative framework is justified by the lack of written documents regarding sexual violence in Hungary during World War II and by the general difficulty of establishing firm conclusions when it comes to quantifying sexual violence. Refusing to partake in what she terms *számháború* (waging war with numbers), Pető avoids giving any numbers regarding raped women in Hungary and instead quotes other authors and their very rough estimates, none of which are based on any reliable sources. By contrast, she attempts to understand the background and reasons behind the atrocities perpetuated by the Red Army in Hungary, atrocities that included rape, murder and plundering. Her explanation is multifaceted and reminiscent of what British historian Anthony Beevor established as reasons for the similar behavior of Soviet troops in Germany. While revenge certainly played a role, it does not explain why Jewish women, for instance, were also raped. The influence of alcohol and poor army discipline were more important reasons, as well as what Beevor describes as Stalinist sexual politics and what Pető sees as a result of an imperial attitude toward the conquered country, to whose women the triumphant army felt entitled. In addition, very importantly, she emphasizes the legal framework, i.e. the fact that the occupying Soviet army fell outside of Hungarian jurisdiction and thus the misconduct of its members went unpunished. Here Pető draws a comparison of the situation in Hungary to that in countries that also had Soviet troops stationed on their territory but which, unlike Hungary, were allies in the fight against the common foe, fascism – such as Tito's Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia, rapes were also reported and although not as numerous as in Hungary, they kept happening despite the good relations between Tito and Stalin at the end of the war; however, unlike in Hungary, in Yugoslavia disciplinary measures were imposed to keep the rapes somehow under control.

One important consequence of the rapes was unwanted pregnancies that in Hungary, according to Pető, in most cases ended in abortions. She therefore considers the temporary legalization of abortion in February 1945 an important step regarding women's reproductive rights in Hungary and gives some fascinating examples of the discourses around aborting pregnancies caused by rape at the time, a measure that even the Church did not outright condemn. Unlike in Germany, where abortions were allowed mainly based on racial reasons, similar considerations seem to have been missing in Hungary. However, many pregnancies still

ended in births of, for the most part, unwanted children. This is a chapter that is little discussed by the author. Although in recent years the topic of children born of war, including children of rape and those from relationships with enemy soldiers, has seen a substantial increase in research interest (see for instance the CHIBOW network), in Hungary this topic has still not been systematically researched. Pető cautions that this research has to be done with the utmost respect of the children (who would now be older adults) and their needs, yet she seems to be reluctant to further delve into this topic. A good way in which this research (that I personally consider very important) could be furthered in Hungary might be through these children's own networks, something that is currently being done in Germany (e.g., the network *Distelblüten – Russenkinder in Deutschland*, who in 2015 even published their stories under the same title) or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example. These networks offer a safe space to the children and empower them by giving them a forum of exchange and support, so that they are gradually able to break the silence and reject the stigma around their background and identity. As members of both the German and the Bosnian groups of children born of war have pointed out, telling their story is a very important element in their journey toward healing their trauma. In the Hungarian context, one recent narrative cited by Pető that broaches the topic of children born of war is Márta Mészáros's 2017 feature film, *Aurora Borealis*.

A major challenge during Pető's research was her attempt to access Russian archival materials that would document sexual violence in World War II. To this day, Russian archives are not open for researchers of this topic, but only for family members and that, too, is limited. Still, interestingly, Pető did find Internet sources that from time to time randomly publish selected archival materials on this topic. Given the present battles around memory politics (201), these documents are far from constituting a reliable source of information, since they can be taken off the Internet as suddenly as they appear; thus they are a rather volatile tool for any researcher. While it is uncertain how and when a more systematic research of the Russian sources may become possible, Pető is also critical of the ways in which the Internet has contributed to creating a less, rather than a more, democratic discussion forum around the memory of sexual violence, and how it has instead contributed to a "phatic" form of communication lacking any factual or research basis and preoccupied mainly with keeping the social contact (170).

While, as a consequence of all the challenges discussed throughout Pető's study, she found it difficult to draw consistent conclusions regarding the behavior of the Red Army's male members, she was able to, based on available research data, analyze the situation and behavior of this army's female members that numbered around 800,000 women (208). Pető found that not only were these women themselves subjected to sexual violence and later denied their place in Soviet cultural memory, but also that they, too, committed acts of sexual violence against men in occupied territories, as documented in a case in Kecskemét. Sexual violence against men is an even greater cultural taboo than sexual violence against women, and not only in Hungarian society but worldwide. This and other relevant data that offer a broader picture regarding women's role in war can significantly alter the image of women as only passive victims in armed conflict and contribute, instead, to a more nuanced gender memory of war, ultimately deconstructing the still dominant cultural binary that defines men as aggressive and women as peaceful "by nature."

Although Pető's study is a well researched, extremely important and fascinating read, what I felt was missing from it were the words of the survivors she interviewed herself. I would

have wished for some examples of how her interview subjects formulated their experiences. Instead, the author quotes from existing interviews with Jewish-Hungarian women documented in the Shoah Visual Archives and from published first-person accounts, such as the well-known and researched narrative by Elaine Polcz, *Asszony a fronton* ['A Wartime Memoir'] and from Fanni Gyarmati Miklósné Radnóti's diary, to illustrate how Hungarian women put their experiences of rape by Soviet soldiers into words. This part of the author's analysis would have been more complete and also more original had she elaborated on her own interviews.

Finally, there are two points on which I would disagree with the author. One is her qualifying of visual representations of sexual violence in general as voyeuristic and as confirming the narrative of victimhood (223). While this can no doubt be true, there are, in my opinion, very successful examples of films that offer other solutions as to how to show and discuss sexual violence without falling into the esthetics of pornographic or voyeuristic representation. Unlike Pető, I would include *Aurora Borealis* among the latter (along with the German book turned into film *A Woman in Berlin*, to mention but a few). The other point on which I disagree with Pető is her contention that because of the silence of rape survivors in Hungary, there was no trauma transmission to the second or third generations. Trauma research has demonstrated that past trauma can be passed to further generations not only through oral transmission or by actions and objects, but also through the survivors' silence. This transference has been demonstrated, for instance, by German psychotherapist Luise Reddemann in her work as trauma therapist with children and grandchildren of the war generation. Similar research in the case of Hungary could yield important results regarding transgenerational consequences of sexual (and other) traumatic experiences without necessarily falling into the trap of corroborating dominant memory practices of national victimhood. Notwithstanding these minor points of criticism, Andrea Pető's *Elmondani az elmondhatatlant* is not only a page-turner but a significant and thorough study of World War II and of its consequences from a feminist perspective. This book is an obligatory reading not only for historians and researchers of gender studies but also for anybody interested in a still insufficiently explored face of armed conflict.