

Kovács, András. 2019. *A Kádár rendszer és a zsidók* ('The Kádár Regime and the Jews'). Budapest: Corvina. 439 pp.

Reviewed by Eszter Susán,* New York University

András Kovács has been studying the history and socio-cultural context of Hungarian Jews since the 1970s, a time when academic discourse about this topic was distorted and limited, given the country's communist regime. In fact, Kovács's 1984 article entitled "The Jewish question in today's Hungarian society" appeared in a *tamizdat* [Russian: 'Published There,' meaning abroad underground publication] in Paris. Since then, Kovács contributed with invaluable academic research to the study of Hungarian Jews after World War II with over one hundred and fifty publications on antisemitism, nationalism and Jewish identity. In his latest book, *A Kádár rendszer és a zsidók* ['The Kádár Regime and the Jews'], he returns to the same questions that he posed in his 1984 essay: why and how did antisemitism survive in Hungary after 1945 if the Jewish citizens were largely assimilated and after 1948 antisemitism was forbidden by law? Kovács identifies three areas where antisemitism survived after 1945: 1. everyday culture, 2. tensions between Jews and gentiles caused by the Holocaust, and: 3. the policies of the communist leadership in the entire Soviet bloc, the focus of this book presented through a wide array of declassified archival materials. The documents show that the recurring issues that fueled the oppression of Jews by the Hungarian Communist Party were rooted in the Soviet Union's inimical foreign relations with Israel, which prescribed anti-Zionism in the entire Soviet bloc. This relationship resulted in the surveillance and persecution of all Jewish activity that was not strictly religious and could appear as Zionist conspiracy. Yet all religious life was controlled and marginalized during the communist era, which limited the infrastructure of Hungarian Jews to a bare minimum.

The eighty-five carefully chosen archival documents studied in the present volume are dated between 1957 and 1989, meaning the Kádár era, which encompasses the "softer" and longer post-Stalinist communist period in Hungary. These materials provide a view into the communist regime's Jewish policy in the making and thus contribute to a great extent to a so far understudied topic in Hungarian history. The documents are organized and examined in five thematic chapters, each starting with an introductory essay explaining the rationale of their selection, their socio-political context and offering regional comparisons with Poland and Czechoslovakia. Hungary's treatment of its Jews may be seen as an example of the most liberal Jewish policy in the entire Soviet bloc. The political leadership in Hungary after the 1956 Revolution made efforts to avoid social conflict, including in its treatment of the

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post-World War II "Jewish question," which remained a sensitive issue in Hungary with its ca. 100,000 Jews, the largest Jewish population in the region.

The majority of the present book's content actually already appeared in English translation in another book by Kovács entitled *Communism's Jewish Question: Jewish Issues in Communist Archives* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2017). The more recent Hungarian version includes the originals in Hungarian, as well as about a dozen new documents. While the contents of the two publications are quite similar, the Hungarian version is indispensable in its intent to advance research on Jewish life under communism in Hungary. The only monograph on this topic was published more than a decade ago, in 2009, in a book entitled *A kommunizmus és a zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon* ['Communism and Jewry in Post-1945 Hungary'], written by Róbert Győri Szabó (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó). At present, several national and regional studies and the slow but gradual increase in access to formerly classified documents allow for a deeper understanding of Jewish politics and Jewish policy within the Soviet bloc. It is invaluable to read these archival materials in the original language of Hungarian, since one has to be able to read between the lines and understand the implicit references, or—to use the metaphor of the American political scientist James C. Scott—to decode the "hidden transcripts" that are present and manifested in any social structure of oppression.

The first chapter of Kovács's book deals with the conflicts around emigration from Hungary to Israel and the communist regime's efforts to regulate the economic and cultural relationship between the two states. The majority of the archival documents in this chapter focus on an unexpected incident in 1957. Since the Jewish emigrants from the Hungarian People's Republic were limited to the bare minimum in allotted cash and property upon leaving to Israel, the Israeli embassy offered them to collect their property in Hungary and return it to them upon their arrival in Israel. After the Hungarian authorities revealed this "smuggling affair," they started a peculiar negotiation with the Israeli government, in which neither side could openly state their actual objectives, yet both were fully aware of each other's hidden agenda: while Hungarian policy makers saw the incident as an opportunity to get financial benefits from Israel, the Israeli government wanted to make sure that a larger number of Hungarian Jews would be allowed to emigrate to Israel. The main reason why the Hungarian government had to conceal its willingness to let Jews emigrate to Israel was that they had to make sure that their foreign policy remained in line with those of the Soviet Union and the Arab countries. The documents illustrate the negotiation process, including the arguments used to justify the on-going transaction, such as the 200,000 Hungarians living in Israel as potential target audience for cultural programs or strengthening the ties with the Israeli Communist Party. The documents also show that Hungary was about to broaden its economic and cultural relationships, until all diplomatic relations of the communist states and Israel were cut off following the 1967 Six Day War.

The second chapter deals with documents related to the Eichmann trial. After the capture of Adolf Eichmann in 1960, Israel called for co-operation with the Soviet, Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian governments in order to collect evidence of the mass murder that happened on their territory. This request posed a problem for these states primarily because, on the one hand, the Soviet Union—and hence also the Soviet satellite states—did not recognize Israel's right to represent or to act in the name of Jews outside of its borders; on the other hand, they could not refuse the request, because they did want to cooperate in the name of anti-fascism. In order to avoid the recognition of the Israeli court's authority, Hungary first considered requesting the extradition of Eichmann, based on the 1943 Moscow Declaration by which fascist criminals had to be sent back to and put to trial in the country where they had committed their crimes. Yet,

since they knew this request might have been rejected, they made an alternative argument for accepting the Israeli court's authority to judge Eichmann, based on the fact that a significant number of Hungarians had emigrated to Israel and become Israeli citizens. As document no. 6 in this chapter shows, the Czechoslovakian Communist Party dismissed these ideas after consultation with the Soviet Union, and suggested other solutions, such as releasing necessary documents through "non-official" channels, such as non-governmental organizations, which Hungary then also followed.

The third chapter focuses on the impact of the 1967 Six Day War on both the relations between Hungary and Israel and the attitude of the Hungarian State to its Jewish citizens up to 1988 and the beginning of the democratic changes. The documents illustrate how the Communist Party with the leadership János Kádár's tried to both please the Soviets regarding the handling of the Six Day War and avoid their even stronger interference in Hungary's domestic politics. The selection of documents about this topic contains a speech by Kádár in which he addresses Jewish party members, clarifying that the Communist Party will not tolerate its members' support of Israel. Kádár never actually mentions the word "Jewish" in this speech, and instead he refers to a "minority of party members" who have a "strong influence" (p. 206). The documents also show that Hungary was moderate in supporting or siding with the Arab states after 1967, making only the smallest possible commitments to them. And all this when Hungary, just like the other countries of the Soviet bloc, had terminated all diplomatic relationship with Israel after the Six Day war. This chapter closes with a few documents that illustrate the process of partly repairing these connections during the 1970s and 1980s because of Hungary's need for Israeli financial means. Interestingly, the antisemitic trope of "international Jewish capital" can be found in the parlance of both the Hungarian and the Israeli business partners taking part in these negotiations.

The fourth chapter introduces documents illuminating how international Jewish organizations, specifically the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, often referred to as The Joint) were able to work in Hungary during the Kádár era. While the JDC is a humanitarian and not a political organization, both organizations were treated as unreliable, due to their ties to the United States and the Western world. The JDC, which between 1945 and 1952 had provided a fifty-two million USD financial support for Holocaust survivors living in Hungary, was officially banned in 1953, still during the Stalinist era, and could only reestablish official relations with Hungary much later, in the mid-1970s. As of 1959 the *Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete*, or MIOK ['National Representation of Hungarian Israelites'], the only official representative body of the country's Jews after 1953, was not allowed to participate in the World Jewish Congress; yet, in the hope of economic advantages, since 1975 the MIOK could join the Congress as an observer, and from 1981 as a full member. Finally, in 1986, the annual conference of the WJC was organized in Hungary with the participation of delegates from twenty-six countries.

The fifth chapter introduces the reader into the various forms of the Hungarian regime's repressive measures against the country's Jews and Jewish institutions. Most of the documents that do not appear in the English edition of Kovács's book are to be found in this chapter. Compared to the Stalinist period, oppression during the Kádár era was more tacit and at the same time more wary of keeping the appearances of democracy, which was an increasingly important consideration throughout the Cold War. Therefore, intimidation and oppression were enacted through invisible means, such as the use of informers or by preventing dissidents from certain positions in order to limit their broader influence. The archival materials reveal three such invisible cases: 1. a failed attempt in 1965 by the political police to turn Hungarian Jews against

Israel vis-à-vis propaganda against the alleged Neo-Nazi character of West Germany, a major financial supporter of Israel since the mid-1950s; 2. the manipulation of the board elections within MIOK through informers in its leadership, and 3. the surveillance of students at the Rabbinical Seminary, and their friends, who were suspected of counter-Soviet or "Zionist" activity. The third case of these is documented in detail and from different perspectives: reports of informers, reports of the Office of Church Affairs (OCA), the Communist Party's controlling body over MIOK, and a verbatim rendering of a 1969 conversation among MIOK leaders with the participation of the Chair of MIOK, himself an informer. This conversation ended with the MIOK leadership's decision to suspend two of the Seminary students, György Landesmann and Iván Beer, just a week before their rabbinic ordination, because of evidence accumulated against them, some of which was as banal as some critical remarks that Beer made during a trip in the Soviet Union.

András Kovács's skillfully written and edited book enables researchers and a wide public to study original archival documents without having to go through the lengthy procedure of gaining access to historical archives. Furthermore, the essays opening each chapter provide a framework and hands-on examples of how to use and interpret archival material in historical research about Hungarian Jews during communism, as well as make the compilation suitable for educational purposes. The present publication is thus an important step on the way to fill some gaps in the history of Hungarian Jewry and more broadly Hungarian society at large during the Kádár era; and as such it should inspire further research on these topics.