

**Vonyó, József, Gömbös Gyula és a hatalom, Egy politikussá lett katonatiszt ('Gyula Gömbös and Power, A Military Officer Turned Politician'). Pécs: Kronosz, 2018. 642 pp.**

**Reviewed by George Deák<sup>1</sup>, Independent Scholar**

The change of regime after 1989 has impelled historians to re-examine the interwar years without the ideological constraints of the communist era. József Vonyó, former chair of the Department of History at the University of Pécs, gives us a well-balanced biography of Gyula Gömbös, the pivotal prime minister of Hungary from 1932 to 1936, who died in office before he could realize most of his plans. This biography is the fruit of twenty years of study, and it is preceded by several collections of sources edited by the author. In his new work, Vonyó seeks to probe the sources of Gömbös's ambitions, hyper-nationalism, antisemitism and militancy, and to present and evaluate his career. Vonyó sees Gömbös as neither a "hero nor as Satan" (558) but ultimately condemns the deleterious effects that Gömbös and those whom he brought to power had on events following his death. Had he succeeded in his ambitions, Gömbös would have been the dictatorial *Vezér* ['leader'] of Hungary, much as Mussolini was *Duce* of Italy. Vonyó thus reverses in his conclusions the more positive interpretation of an earlier post-communist scholarly biography of Gömbös, *Gömbös Gyula, Politikai pályakép* ['Gyula Gömbös, A Political Biography'], written by historian Jenő Gergely and published in 2001 (Budapest: Vince).

Gömbös, who in the 1920s became the leading figure of the *Magyar Nemzeti Függetlenségi (Fajvédő) Párt* ['Hungarian National Independence (Race Protector) Party'], a party dedicated to protecting the Hungarian "race" from the Jewish "race," was himself of ethnic German origin. He was born in 1886 in the small, mostly ethnic German village of Murga, in Tolna county, Transdanubia. His father, whose Hungarian paternal ancestors had gained access to the lower nobility in the seventeenth century, was the *evangélikus* ['Lutheran'] schoolteacher of the town. When Gömbös was in the Lutheran high school of Sopron, his educator father recognized that the rambunctious boy was not cut out for scholarly study and enrolled him in the military academy at Pécs. In 1912, after several years of service in the Royal Hungarian *Honvéd* ['Army'], Gömbös was admitted to the most prestigious officer training school of the Monarchy in Vienna. The Academy emphasized loyalty to the Habsburg ruler rather than to the Hungarian nation, but Gömbös shared the pro-independence nationalism that excited a large part of the Hungarian political classes at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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Vonyó theorizes that it was during his years at the Vienna officers' academy that Gömbös developed strong antisemitic views. Certainly, Vienna, where Hitler had also spent his formative years of 1907 to 1913, was a hotbed of political antisemitism propagated by figures such as Georg Ritter von Schönerer (1842-1921) and Karl Lueger (1844-1910). Still, because the majority of Hungarian interwar antisemitic figures were not schooled in Vienna, the question arises: Is it not likely that Gömbös imbibed the roots of his antisemitism already in his native village or in his Hungarian schooling? In any case, Vonyó is probably correct in positing that it was in Vienna that Gömbös learned of and uncritically adopted the pseudoscientific racial theories of the British-born German writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), author of *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* ['The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century'] (1899).

Though only a junior officer on the general staff at the time of the Monarchy's collapse in 1918, Gömbös sought a leading role immediately after the war in restoring the historic territorial integrity of the "nation." Vonyó shows that this behavior was typical of the ambitious and pugnacious Gömbös, who already as a child had always sought to be the leader in fights and games among the village boys. In his writings and speeches at the time, Gömbös echoed the German extreme right's "stab in the back" thesis, adapted to Hungary, that the nation's recent losses were the result of Jewish defeatists during the war and Jewish Marxist internationalists after it. He used such allegations to attract like-minded counter-revolutionaries to his side in Szeged, where under Western and Romanian protection, hopefuls of a counter-revolutionary government gathered. Already in January 1919, though he was still in the employ of the liberal republic under Mihály Károlyi, Gömbös's new rightist adherents helped him gain the presidency of the Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület, MOVE ['Hungarian National Defense League']. Through MOVE, Gömbös played a major role under the rule of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in organizing the Hungarian National Army which put Admiral Miklós Horthy (1868-1957), a figure of much greater social stature than himself, at its head. Since that time, a relationship of trust and personal dependence developed between Gömbös and his Commander in Chief, Admiral Horthy.

In describing Gömbös's role in the counterrevolutionary White Terror following the defeat of the Hungarian Soviets in August 1919, Vonyó points out that the representatives of the Entente in Szeged realized that the "agile, initiative-taking Gömbös" was behind the "excessive and arbitrary" actions committed by MOVE officers against "local workers" even before August (146-147). Vonyó traces the close relationship between Gömbös and leaders of the White Terror, such as the Héjjas family who committed many acts of extrajudicial mass murder around their home town of Kecskemét. The irregular troops led by Iván Héjjas (1890-1950) in 1920 proudly paraded in 1924 at the public unveiling ceremony of Gömbös's Race Protector Party.

Despite the services by arms that Gömbös had performed for Horthy's rise, once in power, the Regent chose aristocrats who supported a conservative parliamentary system to lead the country, settling in 1921 on the sophisticated, English-speaking István Bethlen (1874-1946) as prime minister. Within this new political context, Gömbös was in fact a radical revolutionary who was initially against parliamentary rule, yet later favored extension of the suffrage. He sought to base his power on the smallholder peasantry among whom he had grown up as well as to advance the Christian middle-classes over the aristocracy. Although Bethlen gave Gömbös a

seemingly leading role in the ruling United Party, by 1923 Gömbös felt compelled to go into opposition and in 1924 became leader of the Race Protector Party.

Vonyó provides a detailed analysis of what race protection meant for Gömbös and how his antisemitic worldview fit within it. Gömbös claimed that the "Magyar" race drew its superior characteristics (which predestined it for rule in the Carpathian Basin) from the supposed larger ethnic group of the "Turadians," to which, it was claimed, the original Hungarians belonged. Christians of other nationalities in the Carpathian basin (including Germans) who had adhered to the Magyar culture were also part of this "race." Gömbös wished to rouse this race from the stupor into which the crafty Jews had lulled it. He was not an original or systematic thinker but a practically selective and imitative one, who communicated more through speeches than through writing. Unlike some other Hungarian antisemites, he did not propose the annihilation of the Jews or, for the most part, their expulsion, at least not of those Jews whose ancestors had settled in the country by 1867 or, in some of his proposals, by 1848. Rather, he focused on restricting the participation of Jews in economic and cultural life to five percent, approximately their proportion in the general population. This portrait of Gömbös's "moderate" attitude is somewhat contradicted by an earlier passage quoted in Vonyó's book, which deals with the period of the Soviet Republic, when for a short time as editor of the counter-revolutionary *Bécsi Magyar Futár* ['Viennese Hungarian Messenger'], Gömbös published an article by another author that urged Hungarians, whom it defined as Christians, to send the bloody parasitic Bolsheviks back to Palestine (147).

The growing cooperation between Italy and Hungary in the late 1920s and Hungary's secret rearmament program prompted the Regent and Bethlen to bring Gömbös back into the fold of the governing party in 1928 on condition that he dissolve the Race Protector Party and refrain from anti-Jewish rhetoric, lest it disrupt the symbiotic relationship that Horthy and Bethlen had with Jewish industrialists and bankers. In 1929 Gömbös became minister of defense and in 1932, having lost faith in the conservative-liberal policies of Bethlen and his followers, Horthy appointed Gömbös prime minister to reverse the political tides that threatened from the Social Democrats and from the extreme right. Following Horthy's orders, in his maiden speech Gömbös announced that "I openly and sincerely declare to the Jews that I have changed my position. I wish to consider that segment of Jewry which is willing to share in the common fate of the nation as my brothers just as I do my Hungarian brothers" [*A zsidóságnak pedig nyíltan és őszintén azt mondom: revideáltam álláspontomat. A zsidóságnak azt a részét, amely sorsközösséget ismer el a nemzettel, éppen úgy testvérenek kívánom tekinteni, mint magyar testvéreimet.*] (288). One may note that this formulation still implies that the Jewish brothers are not Hungarian. Probing the question of Gömbös's sincerity, and basing himself on a careful reading of many sources, Vonyó comes to the conclusion that Gömbös's new position was a tactical concession which he planned to retract once he attained his goal of full dictatorial power over the nation.

Already in the early 1920s Gömbös was an admirer of Mussolini and later an admirer of Hitler, although, Vonyó argues, he did not slavishly imitate either one of the two. However, like them, he was aiming at dictatorial rule and he considered himself to be mysteriously and intuitively aware of where the nation needed to be led. He sought to introduce a corporatist structure alongside a weakened lower house of parliament and to relegate the Regent to a figurehead position. But unlike Mussolini or Hitler, Gömbös had no plans to force his rule upon the nation by violent means.

Eventually, Gömbös's dictatorial designs failed for many reasons. Parliament and the large landholders around Bethlen resisted his plans through existing institutions. Although the party of which he was leader and which he sought to turn into an instrument of his will, the *Nemzeti Egység Párt*, NEP ['Party of National Unity'], had nearly two million registered members, they were not highly committed at the local level. The Catholic hierarchy in the provinces was wary of the Protestant, self-styled *Vezér*, Gyula Gömbös. Parties of the extreme right were able to organize among the workers and the poor peasantry. The *Önálló Kisgazda Párt*, ÖKP ['Independent Small Holders Party'] drew off his targeted base by demanding the widening of the suffrage and a more radical land reform than what Gömbös, constrained by the aristocracy, was able to deliver. Cataloging the growing opposition to the *Vezér's* rule, Vonyó argues convincingly that had Gömbös not died in October 1936, he would have been dismissed by Horthy.

What was Gömbös's legacy for the remainder of the Horthy regime, and beyond? Vonyó argues that by placing his race-protector, intransigently revisionist associates into the military command and other positions, Gömbös greatly contributed to committing Hungary to its eventual alliance with Germany and, ultimately, to its defeat at Germany's side. On page 426 of his study, Vonyó quotes Miklós Kállay (1887-1967), who was prime minister from 1942 until the German invasion in March 1944, to show how Gömbös's men had actually doomed Kállay's delicate attempts to switch sides during the war. We might add that they did so again in October 1944, when the defeat of the Axis was all but sealed. But the figure, views and actions of Gyula Gömbös had effects that went far beyond 1945 in that he left behind him a legacy that preferred a dictatorship to a representative government. Responding to this legacy, Vonyó warns that undemocratic solutions, though seemingly effective in the short run, are deleterious in the long term because they thwart the development of a responsible, rational civic culture (573).