

**Mária Palasik, *Félelemben zárt múlt: Politikai gyilkosságok Gyömrőn és környékén 1945-ben* [A Past Kept Secret Through Fear: Political Murders in Gyömrő and the Surroundings in 1945]. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2010. 248 pp. ISBN: 97896397713**

Reviewed by Deborah Cornelius, Independent Scholar.

In recent years, the immediate post World War II period in Hungary - from the Soviet occupation to the final expropriation of power by the communist party in 1948 - has become of increased interest to scholars of the history of Hungary. The years immediately following the end of World War II have long been regarded as a brief moment of hope after the democratic elections in 1945, only to be snuffed out by increasing Communist control. Recently published books on the period include Péter Kenez, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948* and Mária Palasik's earlier work, *A jogállamiság megteremtésének kísérlete és kudarca Magyarországon 1944-1949* [The Attempt and Failure of the Establishment of the Rule of Law in Hungary]. In this that earlier work, Palasik examines the question whether there was a possibility to develop the rule of law in the years following World War II, a theme she explores in a larger context in her newly published book in English, *Chess Game for Democracy: Hungary between East and West 1944-1947*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2011.

Historian Mária Palasik's present work, *Félelemben zárt múlt: Politikai gyilkosságok Gyömrőn és környékén 1945-ben*, published in 2010, addresses the situation during the spring of 1945 in the district of Gyömrő, bringing to light the abuses of power which presaged the later defeat of a democratic Hungary. Her book gives an objective account of the events in Gyömrő, based on extensive archival research from six hitherto unused archives, the records of the two hundred witness interviews, remembrances of the families and villagers, and the press of the time in connection with the political developments.

In the first months of 1945, the newly formed Provisional Government was unable to control the local police forces which had sprung up during the trauma and confusion of the occupation. As the traditional administration broke down, groups of radical individuals took power into their own hands and terrorized the population, often supported by the Soviet troops. Efforts to bring the situation under control and put an end to the abuses of authority were hindered by members of the communist party, often with the mantra that only through such civilian bodies in control of the police might the 'fascists' be eliminated. There were so many incidents of illegal activities by local police forces that the Council of Ministers was forced to address the matter in May, instructing the Minister of the Interior, Ferenc Erdei, to take measures to supervise the police and end the abuses of the law. Even so, Ernő Gerő, leader of the communist secret police, joined praising the police as the greatest force capable of acting against the "fascists".

Palasik examines the atrocities committed in Gyömrő and the neighboring villages in the spring of 1945 as an example of the first infringements of the law and abuse of authority during the immediate post war period. During the months from February to April of 1945, over twenty respected citizens of Gyömrő and the neighboring villages were taken under the pretext of interrogation by members of the newly formed police, tortured, and murdered. The victims included village notaries, county clerks, two priests, several office workers, two landowners, a

district court judge, a restaurant owner, an estate manager, and a postmaster.<sup>1</sup> In many cases the victim was held for several days in the basement of the office of the Chief Constable, interrogated, and beaten, but allowed to leave for lack of evidence. The victim was then recaptured on the way home, tortured, and murdered with unmerciful barbarity. A number of victims were buried in shallow graves by the side of the lake.

What actually happened in Gyömrő and surroundings, because of the authorities' failure to assign responsibility for the murders, as well as the fear installed in the survivors, remained unclear.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, not only was responsibility not assigned, but the actual number of murdered was never determined. Already in spring of 1945 the atrocities were only discussed in whispers. In 1948 the president of the republic pardoned the perpetrators of the atrocities. It was only after the change of state in 1990 that some of the remaining family members of the victims conquered their fear and pressured the Supreme Public Prosecutor's office to begin an examination of the events, during which over two hundred witnesses were questioned.

Palasik attempts to reconstruct what actually happened in the district of Gyömrő, and how the events were handled under the prevailing state power. Her purpose is not to treat the events on the level of a horror story, but to reveal how the atrocities occurred in the relatively small local district, as well as the political developments through which the Communist Party made use of extra-legal measures to cover up the crimes and avoid assigning responsibility to the perpetrators of the murders.

Organizing the volume chronologically, Palasik introduces her work by describing the antecedents to the events in Gyömrő; the Soviet occupation and collapse of the former administration, the assumption of power by a small group led by communists from the 1919 directorate, the formation of the police, and the terrorization of the population by the small group of radicals.

In the next section, through exacting use of the local archives, family memories, and witness reports, Palasik details the series of murders which occurred over several months, recreating the events through which the victims were taken captive under the pretext of interrogation, imprisoned in the Office of the Chief Constable, and tortured. Village witnesses described the cries coming from the basement of the building as the victims were tortured, as well as seeing members of the police wearing articles of the victims' clothing. Threats by the police kept the inhabitants from discussing the events except in the greatest secrecy.

A major portion of the book deals with the investigation in fall of 1945, which was blocked again and again. Palasik demonstrates how the Communist Party made use of both legal and illegal means to manipulate the coalition government. Minister of Justice, Ágoston Valentiny, was finally forced from his position because of his attempts to establish control over the police and ensure the rule of law. After the free elections in fall of 1945 and the victory of the Smallholders Party, the new state secretary, Zoltán Pfeiffer, succeeded in sending a team to Gyömrő to arrest twenty-one of the perpetrators who were brought to prison in Budapest, but they were released eighteen days later by order of the new minister of the interior, Imre Nagy.

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<sup>1</sup> In his testimony in 1991, Dr. György Endre Kállay, who was instructed to approve the order for amnesty by the President of the Republic, remembered that the suspects seemed to be 'lumpen' elements who had been able to get their hands on weapons. Those whom they didn't like - for example the priest, shop owner, teacher, innkeeper - they murdered. Although in his opinion they did not deserve pardon, he was new to his position and did not want to go against his superiors (221).

<sup>2</sup> For the Hungarian Communist Party it would have been extremely embarrassing if the events had become known to the public.

An attempt to secure the re-arrest of the perpetrators was blocked by Nagy on the order of dictator Mátyás Rákosi and Nagy subsequently forbade any further investigation of the matter.

A final section deals with the fate of the families of the victims who remained without support. Since the murderers were never held responsible, those murdered were never declared innocent victims of political murders. This also determined the fate of the families, who came to be considered enemies of the people. Thus stigmatized, the widows were unable to gain employment, the children prevented from enrolling in institutes of higher education. The fear with which they had been instilled prevented them from speaking about the atrocities. The press was forbidden to write about the murders since the Party had prevented the guilty from being held responsible.

The case was finally closed legally with a declaration of amnesty by the President of the Republic on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1948. According to the order, clemency was to be granted to all those who before the democratic transformation had carried out activities against the people in the conviction that they were serving the goals of the democratic transformation.

Palasik's study is a gripping work, of major importance to specialists of this period of Hungarian history. The results of her solid research will provide an invaluable source to scholars for years to come. Yet the very strength of the work in its exacting documentation may make it somewhat difficult for the more general historian. The lack of a general index is mitigated by an extensive index of names, although a map of Gyömrő and the local communities would have been useful.

Palasik's exacting use of sources, her thorough documentation of each detail of the murders, the activities of the perpetrators, the efforts of individuals to bring the criminals to justice, and documents proving the efforts of members of the communist party to block and cover up the investigation prove most conclusively the abuses of power which presaged the illegal and extra-legal methods of the party which ended the hopes of establishing a democratic Hungary. More generally, this work contributes to growing scholarship exploring the mechanisms by which local actors are motivated to commit atrocities against members of their own communities by wider social, political and economic forces.