

Ablonczy, Balázs. *Pál Teleki (1874-1941): The Life of a Controversial Hungarian Politician* [Translated by Thomas J. and Helen D. DeKornfeld]. Reno: Helena History Press, 2024. 288 pp.

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Balázs Ablonczy's study of Pál Teleki deserves the attention of the scholarly world which focuses on an understanding of the Second World War and its impact on East Central Europe. The author, in my opinion, provides an objective profile of Pál Teleki and his role in that struggle as well as the lead-up to it from the First World War and the Trianon Treaty, through the interwar years, and the ever-increasing grip of Nazi German military power over the region in the 1930s. Ablonczy provides an interesting background portrayal of the Teleki family's descent and Pál's youth, followed by the two decades of his education and development to the First World War and its aftermath.

The author's confession in his Preface, that he has a personal connection to Pál Teleki through the school reforms associated with Teleki's name and his own grandfather's Boy Scout troop attending the World Scout Jamboree in Gödöllő (1933) made me aware of the fact that I too had this kind of link to the subject of his biography. I, too, had a Hungarian (in exile) Boy Scout connection to Pál Teleki's legacy. This experience has had a positive impact on my personal development, even if I did not give Teleki credit for his influence. However, like Ablonczy, I too hope to be objective in analyzing his life and the book that has appeared about him in English.

Balázs Ablonczy's biography is a relatively brief, 288-page book about a life that could easily have led to three volumes and over a thousand pages. But Ablonczy's succinct and reader-friendly treatment in English translation is a much better approach to enable the non-Hungarian reader to understand the problems faced by leadership in the shadow of Hitler and Stalin during the first half of the twentieth century. This English translation is a generally good rendition of the original version of the biography, which first appeared in Hungarian in 2005, with a second amended, although abbreviated, edition in 2018. For this effective presentation in English, based on the latter version, both the author and the translators, Thomas J. and Helen D. DeKornfeld, deserve credit.

The biography reflects excellent documentation and systematic research. This is achieved in spite of the author's concern that "there is no single collection of personal papers" because some of these had been destroyed by Teleki himself in 1938, while the abbot in Pannonhalma

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burned the remainder in the spring of 1945 when Soviet authorities asked for them. Thus, Ablonczy reconstructed Teleki's life from the outside via the correspondence and documents that were collected from individuals, establishments, and organizations with which Pál Teleki came into contact. The wealth of documentation in footnotes and the extensive archival sources (263–266), published documents, memoirs, and Teleki's own publications (266–270), plus books, monographs, assorted published articles, and manuscripts (270–276) is overwhelming. The book is also appended with a useful list of abbreviations and a name and place Index, with the latter always indicating the historical Hungarian and the new successor state designations (276–288). However, aside from the attractive portrait on the front cover, no other photographs, illustrations, or maps are included in the book.

The author's diligence is also reflected in the many-sided, complex portrayal of his subject. His description of Pál Teleki's upbringing covers both his aristocratic roots on his father's side and the Greek patrician entrepreneurial roots on his mother's side. Ablonczy emphasizes the importance of Teleki's strict upbringing by his mother in spite of being an only child, and the many-sided linguistic education that he received. His education included the use of Greek and German in the family and the formal learning of French and English. He also acquired the languages of the Hungarian and Romanian inhabitants of Pribékfalva (Pribilești), the scene of his Transylvanian coming of age. Pál Teleki's personality reflects the consequence of this versatility of nurture. From his mother, he inherited a tendency to be in control, which also meant a certain rigidity in his decision-making. However, in his youth he was fun-loving, a good dancer, he learned to hunt with his aristocratic friends, and he enjoyed horseback riding. On his serious side, he was a good student, which is reflected in the grade reports of the time, and he was endowed with some artistic talent that his caricatures and other extant sketches prove. His many-sided personality also had a romantic and idealistic side attested to by his love for the writings of Karl May and the inspiration he received for African and perhaps global travel from his distant relative, the explorer Count Sándor Teleki.

This connection brings us to the focus of most of Pál Teleki's formal studies and research that Balázs Ablonczy outlines for us. Teleki's role as one of the most prominent geographers in Hungary, as Secretary-General, and for a time even President of the Hungarian Geographical Society enabled him to develop an extensive international network. He traveled to many parts of the world and even did a two-month tour of the United States with his friend Jenő Cholnoky. For a time, Teleki's geographic determinism also led to a Turanian orientation.² But even more important, according to Ablonczy, Teleki's global contacts made him an indispensable member of the Hungarian delegation to Versailles prior to the signing of the Trianon Treaty on June 4, 1920. The Entente's imposed peace without regard to the real ethnographic profile of the Carpathian Basin (as reflected in Teleki's "red map") made revisionism the central issue for Teleki as well as all Hungarian governments during the inter-war years.

From these foundations, Ablonczy does a superb job in tracing and developing Pál Teleki's role as the most important political leader next to Miklós Horthy and István Bethlen in Hungary in this period. The constraints of the geopolitical setting put Teleki and Hungary on a

² For more about the Turanian orientation, c.f.: Ablonczy, Balázs. *Go East! A history of Hungarian Turanism* [Translated by Sean Lambert] Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022. 278 pp.

forced course in both domestic and foreign policy, particularly concerning the options available in the latter. In the “Afterword” to the 2024 edition Ablonczy effectively admits this even if he does not explicitly spell it out. It is not the objective of this review to re-hash the presentation that emerges from the book, a reviewer should simply provide an inspiration for the potential readership and a critique of the author’s work. Here the reviewer will simply summarize the main themes that the reader will encounter in Ablonczy’s presentation. The first theme is Teleki’s encounter with the revolutions led by Mihály Károlyi and Béla Kun and his own reactions from Szeged through the Counterrevolution and his own first term as Prime Minister (1918–1921). The second theme is his public activities in the interwar years, when his main concern is the reconstitution of the Hungarian nation via the building of a healthy social structure that can revitalize the State through the Boy Scouts, youth movements, educational programs, and social reforms. The third theme is Teleki’s second opportunity to spearhead the government (1939–1941), to manage the national revival by direction from above, through policies of equalizing opportunities (*numerus clausus*), land reform, and the revision of Trianon. The fourth theme is Teleki’s attempt to keep out of the war, with symbolic “pro-Axis” posturing to regain and retain the parts of territories (Southern Slovakia, Subcarpathia, Northern Transylvania) lost after the First World War. The final theme presented is Teleki’s moral dilemma of revision versus Yugoslavia after having signed a treaty of eternal friendship. When Hitler decided to attack Yugoslavia through Hungarian territory, Teleki committed suicide to mitigate the damage to national honor.

However, while this book is in many ways a masterpiece, it does have a few weak points that should be mentioned even in this overall positive review. One such shortcoming is that Teleki’s “red map” of the Carpathian basin is not included in the discussion of his role preceding the attempted Hungarian negotiations at Versailles prior to the signing of the Trianon Treaty. This could have been a magnificent centerfold for the book. I am sure the practical question of cost stood in the way. A more significant “flaw” is that the English translation does not mention that some elements of the Hungarian version were not included in the new edition and that the Table of Contents has been totally reworked. The Hungarian (2018) version only includes a name Index, while the English version also has a place Index. But an even more significant problem is that in the discussion of *numerus clausus*, the translators offer a weak rendition of the original by designating the First and Second Jewish Laws as the Anti-Jewish Laws. This is particularly glaring when in the Contents of the book, “The Second Anti-Jewish Law” is one of the listings. This is an inaccurate translation of the law and redundant when the discussion is already presented as anti-Jewish legislation. While I do not know what was included in the original 2005 version of the book, the 2018 version reflects these differences. In fact, the footnoting on the page bottoms seems to be much more extensive in the 2024 edition than the listing of notes at the end of the 2018 edition (301–312). The English edition is about thirty pages shorter than the Hungarian version. This is the case even though the author had noted in the 2018 version (296) that many studies and publications have seen the light of day on Teleki since the first edition. This trend has continued to the present, but the observations and judgments of the author have stood the test of time.

I highly recommend this biography to all scholars and students of East Central Europe. It is a precise and objective analysis of one statesman’s perseverance and courage to preserve peace and honor in impossible circumstances.