

LeBor, Adam. *The Last Days of Budapest: Spies, Nazis, Rescuers and Resistance, 1940-1945*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 2025, pp. 512.

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Adam LeBor's monumental work, *The Last Days of Budapest: Spies, Nazis, Rescuers and Resistance, 1940-1945*, stands as one of the most comprehensive and yet profoundly empathetic English-language accounts of Budapest during the final phase of the Second World War. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this contribution: despite the centrality of the ordeal of Budapest to the history of wartime Central Europe, no comparably panoramic and nuanced narrative exists in a major international language. LeBor's achievement fills a longstanding gap by rendering accessible—both emotionally and intellectually—a chapter of history that has often remained confined to Hungarian historiography. His source base, ranging from diaries and memoirs to diplomatic documents and contemporary press, allows him to weave a textured narrative that conveys both structural forces and individual experiences.

LeBor has lived in Budapest for more than twenty years, and this long personal engagement with the city radiates from every page. But what makes the book truly remarkable is that, as a foreign observer, he takes the time and intellectual care to portray Hungary's wartime leaders, social tensions, and moral dilemmas in all their complexity. LeBor addresses in his book a number of questions that command considerable moral and historical interest: Horthy's role and contested legacy, Hungarian collaboration during the German occupation, the failure of Hungary's attempts to exit the war, the lack of a sense of imminent danger among Hungarian Jews, and others. These are issues to which historians cannot provide unequivocal answers, nor should we expect the book to do so. What it does offer, however, is the significance of the questions themselves, which open up the possibility of historical reckoning and critical engagement with the past.

The author's historical contextualization is unusual in a productive way, as he shows that Budapest's tragedy did not begin with the German occupation, but rather with the political instability that had taken shape in the years following the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, the 1918–19 revolutions, the conservative counterrevolutionary system, and the trauma of the Treaty of Trianon. This longer perspective explains for international readers how grievances,

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revisionist aspirations, and longstanding anxieties ultimately narrowed Hungary's diplomatic room for maneuver. By the time the war reached its closing phase, the political elite found itself facing a series of decisions in which all options were bad, and some catastrophically so. LeBor's attention to these deeper currents helps foreign audiences understand why 1944 unfolded as it did.

The book may also be read as an outstanding contribution to urban history. Budapest is not merely a setting but a protagonist: a city of suffering, courage, betrayal, and endurance. The author depicts the physical destruction of palaces, boulevards, and entire districts, while also emphasizing the long-term cultural loss caused by the annihilation or dispersion of the city's intellectuals, professionals, and artists. This element—often invisible in military histories—adds a crucial dimension to understanding the postwar transformation of Hungarian society.

Central to the narrative is the fate of Hungary's Jewish community, whose position in society prior to 1944 was unusually integrated by European standards. LeBor underscores how, during the Dual Monarchy, Jews became key actors in the economic, cultural, and scientific life of the country. Prewar Budapest emerges as a cosmopolitan metropolis shaped by intellectual dynamism and social mobility. The sharp contrast between this flourishing world and the antisemitism experienced during the war is one of the most painful themes of the book. LeBor gives considerable attention to the psychological dimension: many Hungarian Jews struggled to imagine that existential danger could arise in a country they viewed as their homeland. The tragedy of 1944 thus unfolds against the backdrop of decades of belonging, patriotism, and legal equality, making the disintegration of trust in the state all the more devastating.

LeBor treats the question of Hungarian collaboration with appropriate nuance. While he documents the chilling rise in denunciations during 1944, he also avoids sweeping generalizations. Fear, bureaucratic rigidity, opportunism, and political indoctrination all contributed to the collapse of societal solidarity, yet simultaneously there existed networks of resistance and rescue: forged identity papers, hidden apartments, clandestine organizations, and civilians who risked their lives to save others. This duality – collaboration and rescue, betrayal and courage – forms the moral core of his account. It is a corrective to narratives that flatten the complexity of Hungarian wartime society into simple binaries. However, LeBor refrains from portraying Hungarian society in an exculpatory light.

One of the book's most valuable contributions for an English-speaking audience is its balanced portrayal of Regent Miklós Horthy: LeBor endeavors to depict the full complexity of his political world. He acknowledges Horthy's stabilizing influence in the 1920s while illustrating the limitations of his worldview, shaped by a gentry political culture ill-suited to the totalitarian pressures of the 1940s. Particularly noteworthy is LeBor's inclusion of the Horthy family's internal dynamics—an area largely unknown to readers. By presenting the Regent not only as a political actor but also as a husband, father, and member of a close-knit but insular elite household, LeBor humanizes the decision-making environment without diminishing its failures. He makes an effort to offer a nuanced account of the specific nature of Horthy's antisemitic attitudes as well. These personal vignettes expand the analytical repertoire available to international readers who wish to

understand how political hesitation, generational conflicts, and conservative sensibilities shaped the regime's wartime conduct.

A distinctive strength of LeBor's work is his sustained attention to the female actors who played indispensable but frequently overlooked roles in wartime Budapest. Unlike many narratives that marginalize women or reduce them to symbolic figures, LeBor offers a multi-layered portrayal of women as couriers, informants, rescuers, organizers, and agents of resistance. Prominent among them is Hannah Szenes, whose story gains new depth in LeBor's rendering. Rather than presenting her solely as an emblematic martyr, he reconstructs her mission with a sensitivity to her emotional complexity, grounding her in the broader international history of resistance and in the specifically Hungarian dilemmas of her return. Equally compelling is Countess Klára Andrassy, whose aristocratic background positioned her uniquely within networks of diplomatic and social privilege. LeBor's account shows how women of her milieu could leverage their access to elite circles in support of clandestine operations, often at great personal risk. Her story underscores that the Hungarian aristocracy's contribution to anti-Nazi resistance cannot be understood without recognizing the pivotal role of women within those circles. Also noteworthy is Katalin Karády, one of the most famous actresses of her age, whose anti-Nazi stance and involvement in life-saving activities during the war exposed her to severe personal repercussions. Together with numerous lesser-known women, these narratives create a gendered landscape of wartime Budapest that significantly enriches the existing historiography.

The Last Days of Budapest is both a rigorous historical reconstruction and a remarkably vivid narrative. Despite the weight of its subject matter, it remains accessible, engaging, and emotionally resonant. The book offers an insight into the wartime world of spies who converged on Budapest, tracing several intertwined storylines that together give the work its narrative momentum and almost novelistic quality. By interweaving structural history with intimate human stories, LeBor enables readers to understand Budapest's wartime experience not merely as a sequence of events, but as a deeply human drama marked by complexity, contradiction, and resilience. For American readers—whether familiar with Hungary or encountering its history for the first time—the book offers an indispensable entry point into the complexities of Central Europe's wartime past. It illuminates how societies fracture under pressure, how individuals navigate impossible choices, and how the identity of a city can be shattered and yet, in important ways, endure.