

László Borhi, *Survival under Dictatorships: Life and Death in Nazi and Communist Regimes*. Budapest: Central European University Press [CEU], 2024. 386 pp.

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The author's focus is Hungary, which experienced successive, brutal dictatorships in the twentieth century. The first one was an uncompromising, murderous war against Jews. After the conclusion of the Second World War, a rigid Stalinist era followed, which then exposed its fateful weaknesses in the revolution of 1956. Borhi defines his unique approach at the outset:

"This book is not intended as a systematic account of either the Holocaust or Stalinism, but rather an account of the relationship between the individual and power through the prism of survival. I seek to understand the mechanism of repression and terror created by arbitrary, unbridled power through the experience of individuals, of average people through the example of three episodes: the deportation and murder of Hungarian Jews in Nazi death and work camps; the terroristic reign of the Arrow Cross in Budapest; and, finally, the Hungarian experience of Stalinism under Mátyás Rákosi, as a history of terror experienced from below" (p. 2).

For the first phase of this project, Borhi had extensive documentary resources available: the 3,000 recorded interviews of those who had survived the two fatal periods of the Nazi invasion, first, beginning March 19, 1944, the subsequent deportations of Jews to Auschwitz from the provinces (437,402, according to the report to Berlin by German Ambassador Edmund Veessenmayer), followed by the brutal Arrow Cross dictatorship after October 15, continuing until the end of the siege by the Soviet forces on February 12, 1945.

Even without certainty about the deportation's destination, many Jews committed suicide. The sheer unpredictability became the "greatest obstacle to survival." Borhi also presents the view that the Jewish leaders' failure to alert the Jews to the final aim of the deportations could be seen as a "conspiracy of silence." That accusation, originating from the foremost scholar of the Hungarian Holocaust, Randolph Braham, may not, in fact, be entirely warranted. After all, the entire membership of that Council had been taken captive by Adolf Eichmann's deputies. It should be noted that the Jewish Council did, in fact, distribute the secretly smuggled Auschwitz Report (Protocol) to leading Christian leaders as well as to Regent Horthy, about the time when the deportations began. Fearing instant retaliation by the Nazi invaders, they also remained silent.

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George Klein, who also obtained access to that report at that time, experienced that when he himself had attempted to communicate its contents secretly, by word of mouth, he encountered disbelief about Auschwitz. His reporting about the destination of the deportation was simply unbelievable. (Cf. George Klein, *Pietá*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989, p. 130.) The perplexing uncertainty about the deporting trains undermined the ability of Jews to respond. Borhi concludes that the survivors had descended into an information vacuum. After finally ordering a halt to the deportations, Regent Horthy also attempted to make peace with the Soviet Union. That desperate attempt failed, and he and his government were overthrown by a violent radical, undisciplined Arrow Cross Party, which then devoted all its energy to carry out the Nazi's original extermination designs against over 150,000 Jews still residing in Budapest.

To survive, Jews depended much on the good will of Christian neighbors, and Borhi devotes a number of pages to the tragic circumstances involving sixty-five children and a few accompanying adults hidden in a convent of Catholic nuns. The nuns were unable to prevent the Arrow Cross from entering the convent and then taking and murdering many children. Ironically, efforts to ascertain conspiracies and guilt in such tumultuous circumstances could lead to accusations against those who tried to help. Despite mistakes or shortcomings, the rescuers managed to save at least half of those the Arrow Cross had intended to murder. Nevertheless, the rescuers were accused of failure by not saving all the children in their care, reflecting "the hardship of preserving decency in times of inhumanity." (See also Borhi's 2024 article in the journal *Századvég* online, "Az Egyesült Államok és Magyarország német megszállása".)

A similar ambivalence affecting judgements about individuals who had influence on the issue of survival revolved around building managers, who at this particular time could play a crucial role in shielding Jewish residents from arrest. A certain Mrs. Dobozy, for example, used her position to acquire wealth, demanding financial reward for hiding Jews. On the other hand, despite accusations of evident self-interest, she hid and saved the lives of numerous Jews she had helped to hide.

Borhi's reconstruction of Oszkár Brunner's desperate behavior would appear credible only with the total collapse of all ordinary, governmental discipline. Recalling this crisis of Arrow Cross oppression, a chaotic time when the encirclement of Budapest by Soviet forces was taking place, it may be helpful to consider the comparable case of Oskar Schindler. To be sure, the similarity of the first names is just a strange coincidence. Yet it is no coincidence that, in their extreme circumstances, rescue and survival demanded collaboration with the worst kind of Nazi criminals.

The price of that kind of collaboration in Brunner's case was far greater and more difficult to comprehend. Like Schindler, Brunner had been hiding Jews in a plant that he controlled. To show what happened in Brunner's case, Borhi was able to consult records of three trials against Brunner in the years 1947, 1952, and 1971, which at first acquitted Brunner, but then finally judged him guilty. What was Brunner accused of? During the wild Nazi persecution, he had protected Jews and forged documents for them. But such actions earned him severe beatings and torture and the prospect of execution by the Arrow Cross. Survival, finally, became possible only by joining the Arrow Cross and then by committing those violent torturings and killings that he had tried to

prevent. He was even said to have participated in the so-called "swimming"—those killings that involved the executions at the embarkment of the Danube, memorialized today with the sculpted shoes on the Danube shore. Borhi concludes that Brunner was "a criminal, rescue angel or some of both."

When the author finally turns attention to the Stalinist dictatorship, beginning in 1947, he makes it clear that the available sources to analyze the issue of survival became frustratingly unreliable. The documents left behind by the Stalinists were intended "to obfuscate rather than clarify." The author found it necessary to rely primarily on records of trials. Thus, the examination of survival shifts from the war against Jews to a much wider spectrum of enemies, to be identified by denunciations. Sheer luck or kindness of neighbors no longer sufficed. The obligation to denounce made a potential enemy of everyone. No one was immune to this expectation: collaborate or else! In 1951, 362,000 were taken to court, and an additional 500,000 citizens were investigated. Every year 6,000 cases were tried by secret military tribunals. In a country of just nine million, the statistics imply that everyone was a potential enemy. The system taught one to lie or at least seek ways to deceive the system. Attempts to escape the country often ended in tragic death or a jail term.

Borhi meticulously examines the ways normal citizens, "below" an access to powerful politicians, struggled to survive two terrorist dictatorships in a relatively short period. They became helpless victims. But their stories need also become part of the historical record, just as much as those of the political leaders who tried to control or suppress them from "above." Recalling Leopold von Ranke's admonition that historians must aspire to retrieve history accurately, "as it was," we realize that, with his unique focus on the prism of survival, Borhi departs from Ranke's era, when the appropriate focus tended to be on decision makers. Despite Borhi's modest shift from traditional history writing, he was, nevertheless, able to retrieve the essential aspects of what had occurred, thus succeeding in relating what Ranke had envisioned: the past "as it was."