

Review Article

**The Admiral on Horseback:
A New Biography of Miklós Horthy**

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Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918-1944* (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs; dist., New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Pp. x, 476, illustrations. Price: US \$59.00.

Although I learnt long ago that there is no such thing as the definitive work, on any subject, Sakmyster's prize-winning biography of Admiral Miklós Horthy comes close to being just that.

Hungary's regent — the admiral without a navy, head of a monarchy without a ruler — has not been totally overlooked. Apart from his own memoirs (originally published as *Ein Leben für Ungarn*), the regent (or governor) of Hungary has been the subject of a number of works, ranging from eulogies published in Hungary and Germany while Horthy was still in power, to several shorter or longer denunciations of his regime and himself published during the next regime, and even a short biography by Péter Gosztony. But, as István Deák noted not long ago, there has been "an astounding lack of [comprehensive] biographies" of Hungary's admiral on horseback.¹

Sakmyster's biography is comprehensive and authoritative. It is comprehensive, since it describes and analyzes the actions taken by Horthy when these actions really mattered, that is, as a leader of the counter-revolution in 1918-1920, and while he held office, between 1920 and 1944. To what extent holding office meant taking matters in charge is one of the basic issues the author tackles; the answer, of course, varies from decade to decade, from year to year. Generally, we are told, Horthy remained a ceremonial head of state between 1920-1931, more "pro-active" thereafter.

Sakmyster's treatment of his subject appears authoritative because it is utterly objective. Indeed, it is rather doubtful that anyone could have come up with a more objective treatment. Hungarian historians, sophisticated as they may be, cannot dodge the fact that sympathy or antipathy toward Admiral Horthy is still, even today, a litmus test of political allegiance. Sakmyster, however, is not

a person born in Hungary, and is not a native speaker of Magyar but is among a handful of scholars who have attempted to and succeeded in mastering the intricacies of this most daunting language. The only historian with similar qualifications who has written about the period in detail was the Scotsman Carlyle Aylmer Macartney whose work, however, falls short of being impartial: while he wrote contemporary oral history, largely on the basis of interviews, almost all his informants happened to be royalists or members of the Hungarian establishment during the Horthy regime.

Moreover, as far as I know, the author is not a native of, or spokesman for, some other East-Central European land. After all, among the most negative assessments of Horthy and his regime we find the works of those scholars, and others, who have adopted a Czech, Slovak, Serbian, or Romanian point of view. Perhaps their bias is excusable, for they have responded to Horthy in kind; he was, indeed, a biased person in many ways, something of an upper-class (actually, gentry class) Archie Bunker. Once the Treaty of Trianon went into effect, depriving historic Hungary of two-thirds of its territory and half of its population, he did not hesitate to voice his hatred toward Hungary's neighbours, albeit reserving his strongest contempt for Communists and "Galician" (i.e., poor) Jews. While we must understand why the assessment of Horthy by some of Hungary's neighbours is biased, the fact of bias remains.

How do I know that Sakmyster's work is "objective?" For one thing, his biography gives Horthy credit where credit is due, yet does not mince word in denouncing the man for his many weaknesses, beginning with the fact that he was not the right person to head a small country, wedged between two aggressive great powers and surrounded by smaller foes. For another thing, Sakmyster's assessment pretty much jibes with what one may read in my father's diary from 1944, the year of the German occupation, which the author has not read, or at least does not refer to. From his place of hiding, my father described Horthy, with unconcealed bitterness, as the wrong man at the wrong time: "chance has placed in the hands of this intellectually and morally mediocre person the fate of a country."

Although this work will most likely prove the definitive biography, this is not to say that Sakmyster has told us everything we may wish to know about Horthy. Some personal, non-political details might have been added to clarify the contradictions. For instance, was Horthy a man of "sterling honesty" as the British ambassador believed (p. 152), agreeing with what seems to be Horthy's image of himself, or a "cunning rogue" as Hitler stated at one point (p. 309)? Sakmyster own assessment seems to be that Horthy was "never an adroit liar" (p. 299). In fact, he refers to "Horthy's prevarications" (p. 54) at an early stage in his regency, good enough to pull the wool over the eyes of Western diplomats.

Was Horthy a persecutor or a protector of the Jewish population of his country? Indeed, Horthy's ambiguous (to put it kindly) attitude towards Jews is a central theme of Sakmyster's work. Sakmyster gives us one side of this attitude when discussing the mass deportations during the first two months of the

German occupation: "like Pontius Pilate, Horthy ... hoped to wash his hands of this distasteful matter" (p. 342). But then, as the author does not fail to note, Horthy did finally put his foot down. Having received information that the deportations were not for the sake of supplying Germany with needed manpower, Horthy did decide to challenge the occupation force. As the Einsatzkommandos, and especially their extreme right-wing Hungarian assistants, were all set to deport the Jews from the ghetto and "yellow-houses" of Budapest, he ordered loyal troops to surround and occupy his own capital city. It was an opportune moment, for the Nazi German leadership had its hands full with the Allies, who had just landed in Normandy. Perhaps to his own surprise, Horthy's sudden determination had the intended effect, the Jewish population of Budapest was saved by the counter-coup — at least for the time being.

Did Miklós Horthy have the intellectual qualifications to lead a nation? According to the British ambassador, he was of "no great cleverness" (p. 152). According to Sakmyster himself, although he spoke several languages, Horthy lacked "clarity of vision," "political acumen" (p. 60). According to Deák, however, he was no less intelligent than Maréchal Pétain of Vichy-France, or Generalissimo Francisco Franco. Clearly, there were instances when Horthy's moves may even be viewed as shrewd. In October 1921 (in the Eastern regions of Europe October is when momentous events take place) Charles Habsburg, the pretendant to the thrones of Hungary and Austria, attempted a second comeback to Hungary, this time backed by a military force. Horthy's troops fought a pitched battle on the outskirts of Budapest and the pretendant was forced to give up. Thus Horthy was able to hold on to his regency, yet somehow managed to project the image of one who is not power-hungry, but willing to give up power when the interests of the country demand it; in fact, he continued to appear as even "Kaisertreu," that is, loyal to the Habsburg family.

It may be irrelevant, but since there are a number of cryptic references to Horthy as a bridge-player and to his partners as being Jewish industrialists I, for one, would be curious to know, how good a player was he? How did the players interact around the bridge table?

A description of other traits of Horthy's character might have been helpful. Was he a man of moral and physical courage? Was he the brave man who, once wounded, remained on the deck of his flagship to direct the naval battle at Otranto? Or, do we get a more accurate impression of his character when, on the eve of the German invasion of Hungary, brow-beaten by Hitler at their last meeting in Klessheim, he was cowed into submission; and again, on October 16, 1944, when he was cowed into appointing Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the right-wing extremist Arrow-Cross movement whom he despised, as Hungary's next prime-minister?

There were extenuating circumstances; indeed, it is hard to blame Horthy for acting like a family man and a father. Already in 1942 he had lost his older son, who had volunteered as a pilot on the Eastern Front. At dawn on October 15th, when Horthy was on the verge of proclaiming the armistice he had

negotiated with the Soviet Union, his remaining son, Miklós, was lured into a trap by the SS — by Otto Skorzeny, the selfsame officer who a year earlier had led a paratrooper detachment to free Mussolini — and was kidnapped (he was rolled into an oriental rug and loaded onto an awaiting German truck which sped away with him and his kidnapers).

Indeed, some of the contradictions in Horthy's actions may be explained by circumstances of his private and family life, about which the reader might wish to know more. Circumstantial evidence suggests that some of his more admirable deeds must be credited, at least in part, to the influence and good sense of his wife and two sons.

Furthermore, it might be worth the reader's while, in order to receive a more complete picture of Hungarian history of the period, to read Horthy's biography along with the equally excellent biography of one of his prime ministers, István Bethlen, by Ignác Romsics.³

My final question to Thomas Sakmyster is: what prompted him to write the biography of Horthy? Would he not have derived greater satisfaction from writing the biography of someone truly admirable?

NOTES

¹Istvan Deak, "Nikolaus von Horthy: Admiral und Reichsverweser," *Internationale Hefte*, 1995, p. 72.

²Miksa Fenyő, *Az elsodort ország* (Budapest: Magvető, 1986), 2nd edition, p. 43.

³Ignác Romsics, *István Bethlen: A Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874-1946* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Originally published as *Bethlen István: Politikai Életrajz* (Budapest: Magyarországtudató Intézet, 1991). The reader might also be interested in István Bethlen, *Bethlen István Emlékirata, 1944*, ed. Ignác Romsics (Budapest: Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó, 1988). With introductions by Ignác Romsics and Ilona Bolza.