



The White Terror: Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921 by Béla Bodó.

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Like most historians, Béla Bodó (Univ. of Bonn) considers World War I to be a turning point in history. Four empires collapsed in defeat, including the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, which dissolved into several successor states in October and November 1918.

For Hungary, the transition to independent statehood started with a liberal democratic revolution (31 Oct. 1918) that spawned the Hungarian People's Republic. Unable to defend itself from its neighbors, Serbia, Czecho-Slovakia, and Romania, it was replaced on 21 March 1919 by the communist Hungarian Soviet Republic, whose intent was to defend the country in alliance with communist Russia and model their policies on the Bolshevik example. As Bodó points out, the government socialized industry and expropriated the large estates without redistributing the land. It also engaged in aggressive anti-religious propaganda. While the Hungarian Red Army was fighting against the neighboring invaders, it took its cue from Lenin's Russia and employed terror to eliminate or intimidate opponents of the regime. The Deputy Commissar of War Tibor Szamuely put József Cserny in charge of the elite Red militia detachment, the "Lenin Boys," a Hungarian version of the dreaded Russian Cheka. Increasingly unpopular at home and unable to overcome a Romanian offensive, the Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed on 1 August 1919.

The subsequent rule of the counter-revolutionary White Terror is the main subject of Bodó's excellent monograph. The author is a recognized authority who has written extensively on the White Terror.¹ Among the precedents he examines are the anti-Semitic and political violence that marked the fall of the communist regime. He notes paramilitary groups and civilian militias undertook the White Terror, allegedly in response to the Red Terror of the Soviet Republic. He finds that "The White Terror not only claimed more lives and caused more suffering than the Red Terror; the level of cruelty displayed by the right-wing paramilitary groups far exceeded the brutality of Red troops" (280). He buttresses this claim with vivid accounts of killings, torture, and pogroms, including photographs of victims hanging from trees and groups of people about to be executed.

In a comparative chapter incorrectly titled the "Red Terror as Reaction to the White Terror,"² Bodó argues that only a few of the avengers had been victimized by the Red Terror (91). He considers the social background of both perpetrators and victims. He points out that the radical right blamed the Jews for the Red Terror, but cites statistics showing that most of those who carried out the terror were of non-Jewish background. He also observes that the Red Terror was a matter of political violence, while the White Terror focused both on political and ethnic violence (115).

1. For references, see Rudolf Paksa, "A fehérterror logikája: Események, olvasatok, kontextusok" [The Logic of the White Terror: Events, Readings, Contexts], in *Terror 1918–1919: Forradalmárok, ellenforradalmárok, megszállók* [Terror 1918–1919. Revolutionaries, Counterrevolutionaries, Occupiers], ed. Rolf Müller et al. (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2019) 236.

2. The inversion may be a printer's gaffe.

According to Bodó, the most violent phase of the White Terror lasted from mid-1919 to 1921, and targeted mostly Jews, few of whom had played any part in the Soviet Republic. Still, the terrorists justified their hate crimes as retribution against the Jews who were “murderers, war profiteers, traitors and Communists” (xv). This campaign had popular support mainly from the Christian middle class. Increasingly inconvenient to both the government and the establishment, the White Terror petered out by 1924.

On 1 March 1920, parliament elected the commander of the National Army, Miklós Horthy, regent and head of state. Bodó shows that Horthy, as head of the counterrevolutionary National Army, was complicit in the bloody deeds of the officers’ battalions. Though he did not order or participate in executions and torture sessions, he protected from persecution the lawbreaking officers and paramilitary troopers who saw him as their partner in crime.

The book’s preface and first chapter concern “a village hanging” at the end of August at Fonyód, a village on Lake Balaton, a microhistorical event that “confronts, quite directly, current debates of paramilitary violence in Central and Eastern Europe during and after the First World War: the retreat of the state, culture of defeat and the brutalization of soldiers and society” (xxii).

The three innocent middle-class Jewish victims of the hanging included the economist Albert Tószegi, who had converted to Catholicism at an early age. The lynching was carried out by locals, egged on by a paramilitary group commanded by Pál Prónay, a World War I veteran. The group was associated with the National Army and comprised mostly wartime officers organized in the French-occupied town of Szeged during the Soviet Republic. Though ostensibly formed to fight the Reds (it never did), its glory days followed the Soviet collapse as the arm of the counterrevolution.

Sixty percent of the Soviet Republic’s government commissars and deputy commissars were of Jewish background and had long since abandoned their religion. Still, as Bodó asserts, in Hungary, where political anti-Semitism was commonplace, the Jewish presence in government was deeply resented. Mária Kovács has, however, stressed that only ca. 3,000 of Hungary’s 500,000 Jews participated in the communist experiment.³ Yet, as Bodó indicates, the Jews of Hungary were held collectively responsible for the acts of the erstwhile Soviet Republic.

According to Bodó, anti-Semitic rumors motivated mass participation in pogrom-like violence during the counterrevolution. Anti-Semitic brutality in Hungary was based on rumors and pure invention that went back to the 1880s, but were energized during and right after the First World War. During the counterrevolution, anti-Semitic violence “served as means of diversion by trying to shift responsibility for the war and the post-war crisis from the elite gentile section of the middle class to Jews” (11). This quotation indicates that Bodó sees the counterrevolution as part of the postwar process. Elsewhere in the book, however, he seems to share Robert Gerwarth’s recent and now popular concept of a “long World War I” that lasted until 1923.⁴ He also likens the intensity of the ethnic conflicts generated by the war to the religious wars of the seventeenth century (45). In that case, the White Terror belonged to the era of the World Wars that Raymond Aron has dubbed “the second Thirty Year’s War.”⁵ This alternative paradigm includes, besides the White Terror, the virulent anti-Semitism of interwar radical student organizations, whose activities Bodó links to anti-Jewish laws of the late thirties and early forties. In his epilogue, he casts post-World War I anti-Semitic paramilitary pogroms as precursors to the Holocaust.

3. *Törvénytől sújtva: A numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920–1945* [Punished by the Law: The Numerus Clausus in Hungary, 1920–1945] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2012) 49.

4. *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016).

5. *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (NY: Praeger, 1968) 297.

The author attributes the post-armistice violence to the length and cruelty of the war that prepared the population to acquiesce in vicious practices, noting that, during the second half of the war, home-front hardship caused anti-Semitic outbursts. While the wartime governments rejected anti-Semitism, there was, nonetheless, an increase in political anti-Semitism. Bread riots in the countryside with traditions of anti-Semitic violence led to destruction of Jewish property and contradict popular belief (shared even among some historians) that anti-Semitism in Hungary grew out of Jewish participation in the Soviet Republic. Bodó shows that political anti-Semitism was rife in Hungary even before 1919.

According to Bodó, rural violence increased with the return of the troops from the front following the armistice of 3 November 1918. He characterizes the November rural uprisings as jacqueries suppressed by civic militias. He also observes that few Jews were killed in the anti-Semitic riots, but property damage ran into the millions of kronen. Bodó describes the rebellions as apolitical social protests unlike the anti-dictatorial rural uprisings during the Soviet Republic. Citing Arno Mayer's triad of revolution, counterrevolution, and anti-revolution, he identifies the peasant clashes with the revolutionary goals and policies of the Soviet government, which disregarded peasant interests such as land redistribution, as characteristically anti-revolutionary (61). He identifies the counterrevolution as hostile to the ideals of the two revolutions and their laws and social policies. It opposed working class interests and land reforms and aimed to overturn "one of the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment and nineteenth century liberalism, the emancipation of the Jews" (67–68).

Regarding the number of victims of the terrors, Bodó seems to accept State Prosecutor Albert Váry's 1922 statistic of 590 for the Red Terror (119n, 13–14, 21). He notes, however, that most victims died fighting or were executed immediately after the suppression of a rising (116). But the White Terror was indiscriminate: Bodó estimates that ca. 5000 victims killed between August 1919 and 1924 included about 1,250–2,500 Jews. Of these, ca. 625–1,250 died in prison or internment camps (95). He surmises that 10–13 thousand people were interned in 1919–24 (140).

A significant political consequence of the White Terror was the *numerus clausus* legislation favored by anti-Semitic student militias, veterans, and civic and political organizations. Act XXV/1920 limited Jewish university students to the population ratio of Jews in the country. This restriction "reversed the process of emancipation and permanently excluded Jews from the nation by defining them as an ethnic group or race" (255).

Bodó's epilogue explores the relevance of the history of the White Terror for the present. He mentions the revival of paramilitarism, paramilitary politics, and the cult of Horthy (306) favored by extreme right wing groups. By the time of his book's publication, however, it was evident that the government's policy was close to the radical right's. Symbolic of the overlap is the official consecration of the reconstructed memorial to the victims of the Red Terror. Unveiled in 1934 by the counterrevolutionary Horthy regime (121n21), it was destroyed in 1945 by its opponents. At its re-dedication (31 Oct. 2019), László Kövér, the speaker of the parliament representing the right-wing authoritarian Orbán regime, declared: "The heirs of the Lenin Boys are facing us even today and, for now only in a virtual world, continue where the Szamuelys and the Csernys stopped one hundred years ago"⁶ His statement, while justly assailing the Red Terror, clearly re-legitimizes the White Terror in the government's memory politics. Béla Bodó's monograph is now the basic book for anyone wishing to grasp the nature of the White Terror.

6. László Kövér, "Hivatalos Honlapja" [The Official Home Page] (31 Oct. 2019) – available online.