



WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM MAKING VISIBLE A FORGOTTEN MASSACRE IN BUDAPEST, 1944

Andrea Pető

On October 15, 1944, Piroska Dely led a paramilitary unit to kill and rob Jewish inhabitants of Csengery 64 in Budapest. Although the massacre was memorialized by the first private Holocaust memorial erected in Budapest on October 15, 1945, little work has been done to create a full accounting of the incident, in particular, a gendered one. The stories of Piroska Dely and the other female participants in the massacre have been largely forgotten. Much of this is attributable to the way their prosecutions were handled by the people's tribunal of Hungary following World War II.

In *The Forgotten Massacre: Budapest 1944* (DeGruyter, 2021), Andrea Pető uncovers the gripping history surrounding the violence that unfolded in Csengery 64. By examining the contextual factors that influenced the shaping of the history of this event, Pető contributes to the creation of a much-needed gendered explanation about a controversial segment of Hungary's past. In so doing, she expands our comprehension of the conditions that continue to impact Hungary's understanding of its past.

Absence of a Gendered Explanation of the Massacre

In the creation of historical memory, historian Pierre Nora asks, "What is the event and for whom?" What purpose does memory serve? Is it to create an accurate depiction of an event or events? Is it to achieve justice, or is it to create a version of the truth that is politically and socially acceptable? The massacre in Csengery 64—which was intimate in the manner in which it was conducted, with neighbors turning on neighbors in the dead of night—was downgraded and made insignificant in the decades following World War II. The people's tribunal system of Hungary contributed to the creation of a historical record of the massacre that was biased and wholly inaccurate. Subsequently, the Csengery 64 massacre, its participants, and its victims were neglected and forgotten in most Hungarian research about the Holocaust. Extant research has largely focused on descriptions of the deportations of Jewish Hungarians and of their internment in concentration and death camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. In later years, the focus of the Hungarian Holocaust literature turned towards explaining the behavior of politically important men in Hungary who collaborated with Nazi Germany.

The version of the Csengery 64 massacre created by the post-World War II communist-dominated people's tribunal system portrayed the female perpetrators as "bloodthirsty beasts," irrational, and senseless. Rather than create a memory that addressed the anti-Semitism of the perpetrators (male and female alike), or one which granted decision-making agency to the female perpetrators of the violence, the tribunals created a version of events heavily imbued with traditional gendered stereotypes. This is clearly evident in court testimony of the female perpetrators. A traditional gender hierarchy was imposed on the tribunal process. The fact that some female perpetrators were able to use their "femaleness" as a defense effectively reduced their complicity to a gender stereotype. On the other hand, for those perpetrators like Dely, who did not conform to existing gendered expectations of society, their guilt became a matter of their politics and lifestyle.

Dely was a divorced, single, employed woman who resided alone. To be a wage-earner in Budapest during the inter-war period profoundly shaped the experiences and political motivations of a generation of women. For a factory worker like Dely, gender discrimination in the workplace made the political far-right appear as a more attractive means for political and economic advancement. The "conservative offer" made by the government in Hungary between World Wars I and II to permit women to join the workforce was not acceptable to many working or precariously employed women. In examples like that of Dely, the propagation or even the perpetration of violence became not only a form of political agency but also an employment strategy.

At her trial, Dely was demonized. Witnesses were quick to point out her culpability, less so on moral grounds than political ones. Dely's portrayal in the recent literature about the Holocaust and post-war political justice in Hungary reflects the image created by the tribunal. Dely was an "Arrow Cross woman" who *uncritically* embraced far-right thoughts, discourse, and actions. Once again, a female is reduced to an extant gender stereotype, this time of a woman easily seduced by a set of ideals and brought into a structure of violence created by men. Interestingly, after years of research, the question is open as to whether or not Dely even had official ties to the Arrow Cross Party.

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Contribution of *The Forgotten Massacre*

Why women like Dely were drawn to the Arrow Cross Party, as well as how these women were treated by the people's tribunal system, remains an understudied area. A theorizing of the Holocaust involves a *study of silences within silences*: sexuality within gender, sexual violence within genocidal violence, memory within history, the methodological within the theoretical, the personal within the public and the academic, among others. Dely's story illustrates that it is not enough to tell the stories of women, be they perpetrators or victims. It is necessary to analyze the factors that made their stories invisible. *The Forgotten Massacre* conceptualizes gendered silencing as a theoretical and historical issue. Silencing the story of this massacre complicates our understandings of the gendered dichotomy of perpetrator vs. victim. Silencing also has negative implications for justice and accountability. There are also certainly challenges associated with "un-silencing," or of shining a light on a hidden past. *The Forgotten Massacre* demonstrates that the workings of gendered memories and post-memories in shaping the present and the future is a complex process.

Recommendations

Civil society organizations in Hungary and beyond must continue to widen the audience who are actively shaping public memorialization processes.

- In the case of the massacre in Csengery 64, the Anthropolis Association's work on the history of Csengery Street is exemplary. They involved volunteers and primary school students aged 12-14. The students made a film in groups about the process of learning about the massacre and lives of the perpetrators and survivors. This educational program provides an excellent example of the impact civil society associations can have in broadening the dialogue.

Public money should be spent to set up sustainable educational infrastructure to facilitate dialogue and educational programs.

- The Government of Hungary must make a greater effort to expand nationwide dialogue on the Csengery 64 incident and other controversial elements of Hungary's past. One possible way to achieve this could be the creation of a national educational network to provide professionally relevant educational materials on the multiple perspectives of Hungary's past.

About the Author

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Recommended Reading:

- Pető, Andrea. *The Forgotten Massacre*. Berlin: DeGruyter, 2021.
- Klaesmann, Borbála. "Abandoned, Confiscated, and Stolen Property: Jewish–Gentile Relations in Hungary as Reflected in Restitution Letters." *Holocaust Studies* 23, no. 1-2 (2017): 133-148.
- Pető, Andrea. *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party. Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in the Second World War*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Ádám, Pál István. *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust in Hungary*. London: Palgrave, 2017.
- Altınay, Ayşe Gül, and Pető, Andrea. "Europe and the Century of Genocides: New Directions in the Feminist Theorizing of Genocide." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 4 (2015): 379-385.