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Elmondani az elmondhatatlant: A nemi erőszak Magyarországon a II. világháború alatt [To speak the unspeakable: Rape and sexual abuse in Hungary during World War II]. By Andrea Pető. Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2018. 280 pp.

Elmondani az elmondhatatlant addresses an often silenced and much politicized historical subject in a complex analytical mode while also taking a clear normative stance. As Andrea Pető explains, in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, the mass rape committed by members of the Red Army was a strictly taboo subject. These crimes may have been recurrently discussed in the West during the Cold War, but this was frequently done as part of broader anti-communist propaganda efforts and thus tended to lack proper context and nuance. As Pető rightly remarks, only as a consequence of the 1989 change of regime could the silence surrounding the subject finally be broken in Hungary. Democratization created space for various feminist (scholarly and artistic) approaches, which tended to explore mass rape and its aftermath of silence and silencing as integral parts of the imposition of (another) patriarchal order. As Pető notes, in more recent years, discussions of mass rape have been increasingly dominated by the hegemonic anticommunist politics of memory of the Hungarian Right. Since the institutionalization of illiberal perspectives, public discussions may reference the female victims of wartime rape more frequently than was the case before, but these new-old interpretations aim to embed these stories in an elaborate but nebulous history of national suffering. As Pető points out, these semi-official perspectives are rather selective and aim to impose gendered meanings on historical events without enabling those who actually suffered during the assertion of control by the Red Army to tell their individual stories and be listened to.

It is thus apt that Pető begins her monograph with a discussion of theoretical and methodological issues, focusing on the inherent difficulties of addressing a subject as painful and sensitive as mass rape, while pointing also to the fragmentary nature of the available sources. The book then sketches the history of rape in Hungary during World War II, while appropriately referencing the ethical concerns and epistemological difficulties any attempt at the narrative of such a history would raise. While the monograph recurrently emphasizes the structural causes of sexual violence, it also offers contextual analyses, which highlight that in the final stages of the war, all five main factors which predict the imminent threat of mass sexual violence (the collapse of state authorities,

a vacuum of societal norms, the absence of effective military leadership, a militaristic definition of masculinity, and the widespread anger and frustration among troops) were present in Hungary. The book continues with a discussion of the major consequences of these crimes, such as related issues of public health and the resulting changes in Hungarian abortion law.

The bulk of *Elmondani az elmondhatatlant* in turn explores how the remembrance of mass rape or, more precisely, the dialectic of the silence surrounding mass rape and the externally imposed silencing of its accounts has unfolded in the postwar era. The author notes, on the one hand, that in the absence of reliable documentation, competing statistics concerning the number of victims and the heated debates surrounding these figures ought to be seen not only as unscholarly but, more generally, as inappropriate. On the other hand, she explains that the paucity of official, state-based documentation means that the memory of historical events has been construed and reshaped primarily through novels, memoirs, movies, documentaries, and partly also through photographs. Although, as Pető reflects, relatively few first-person memoirs have been published in Hungarian, with Alaine Polcz's *Asszony a fronton* (published in 1991 and in 1998 in English translation by Albert Tezla as *A Wartime Memoir: Hungary 1944–1945* and in 2002 with the title *One Woman in the War*) constituting perhaps the most significant exception.

The tendency to avoid the concrete subject, the use of strategies of impersonalization, and the emphasis on the consequences have indeed remained the dominant trends in efforts to address these unpunished crimes. The central question regarding remembrance might thus be who spoke instead of the victims and how. To answer this moot question, Pető's monograph sketches the legal, historical, visual, and digital dimensions of remembrance. An uncontested merit of the book is that she consistently avoids the ethnicist and Orientalist language that previous discussions of the subject have all too often employed.

Moreover, Pető also manages to relate to the perspectives of the perpetrators in a critical but not unemphatic manner, pointing to previously ignored aspects of the violent and brutal conquest of Hungary by the Red Army. While addressing some relevant features of the sharp contest underway at the moment between Russia and Ukraine regarding commemoration, Pető dissects the state-backed idealization of the Red Army characteristic of contemporary Russia and founded on the flat denial of mass crimes. She also strongly criticizes the continued practice of allowing researchers only restricted access to key historical documents.

Another notable merit of the book is that it illuminates specificities of the Hungarian case in a comparative framework. The mass crimes committed in Budapest and Hungary are studied alongside similar ones committed in Vienna and the French-occupied area of Germany, respectively. Another recurrent object of comparison is Poland, though with a somewhat different intention – namely to identify important differences and explain how the strength of Polish resistance may account for some of these. The remembrance of these crimes in Hungary is in turn compared and contrasted with recent contests regarding the remembrance of sex slavery of Korean women under Japanese subjugation. As Pető shows, in this case, similarly high levels of politicization, which also resulted in significant international tensions, have yielded many more and often rather laudable initiatives.

Accordingly, the book closes with a thoroughly negative assessment of the Hungarian situation in the vein of a *Defizitgeschichte*. Pető remarks critically that one finds in Hungary neither a welcoming institutional setting nor an inclusive narrative, and thus a shared perspective on different victim groups and their diverse stories cannot possibly emerge. Hungarians today do not possess a nuanced and precise language with which to discuss these questions, and there are no public spaces to enable and foster the articulation of painful and sensitive individual stories. As the author notes, the psychological processing of past experience is, thus, far from complete. This monograph is a milestone in Hungarian historiography, as it provides a complex and ethically conscious scholarly treatment of its rarely and even then often inadequately discussed subject. One can only hope that, Pető's dark prognoses notwithstanding, it will help foster greater openness to the subject and more earnest dialogical engagement with it.

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