
**HUNGARIAN, GERMAN, AND JEWISH
CALCULATIONS AND MISCALCULATIONS**
in the Last Chapter of the Holocaust

Randolph L. Braham

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HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
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2010

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First printing, February 2010

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This occasional paper is closely based upon Professor Randolph L. Braham's
November 30, 2009 lecture "Hungary: The Controversial Chapter of the Holocaust,"
delivered upon his acceptance of the
LADISLAUS LASZT ECUMENICAL AND SOCIAL CONCERN AWARD
presented by and at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

It is widely recognized that the destruction of Hungarian Jewry constitutes one of the most controversial chapters in the history of the Holocaust. Speculatively speaking, this chapter of the Holocaust ought not to have been written. By the time the Jews of Hungary were subjected to the Final Solution in 1944, the leaders of the world, including the national and Jewish leaders of Hungary, were fully aware of the realities of Auschwitz. The Nazi propaganda campaign about new wonder weapons notwithstanding, it was generally believed that the Third Reich would lose the war. Italy had extricated itself from the Axis alliance in late summer 1943; the Red Army, having liberated almost all of the Soviet Union, was already close to the Romanian border; and the Western Allies were completing their plans for the invasion of Europe. Many among the Nazis themselves realized that the war had been lost. With the approaching *Götterdämmerung*, however, they tried to triumph at least in their parallel war against the Jews.

In contrast to the conventional war, in this conflict the Nazis had all the advantages: a formidable military power that for a while controlled almost all of Europe; a Christian population that was intoxicated with the venom of racism and antisemitism; Quisling governments that were eager to collaborate; and volunteers ready to participate in the killing operations. The Jews everywhere were essentially

helpless and defenseless: they were marked, isolated, expropriated, concentrated, and deported to extermination and labor camps. Most of their Christian neighbors were indifferent; many, driven by rapacious instincts, were eager only to lay their hands on Jewish property; others, motivated by political-ideological convictions, were actively involved in the persecution of the Jews. Only a few dared to come to their aid.

During the first four-and-a-half years of the Second World War, the Jews of Hungary felt relatively secure. They were generally unaware of what was happening to their coreligionists abroad. While they suffered approximately 60,000 casualties during this period—some 42,000 died in labor service, approximately 18,000 were murdered near Kamenets-Podolsk (summer 1941), and nearly 1,000 were massacred in and around Újvidék (January–February 1942)—they continued to convince themselves that they would survive the war, albeit economically much worse off. Hungary, they rationalized, was after all a member of the Axis alliance; what happened in antisemitic Poland and elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe could not possibly happen in civilized and chivalrous Hungary; the Hungarians would never forget the great contributions their fellow citizens of the Jewish faith had made to the advancement of the political interests and the modernization of the nation; and, finally, the war itself was bound to end soon with the victory of the Grand Alliance.

These rationalizations had some basis in fact until early 1944. Hungary was the only country in Nazi-dominated Europe that still had a relatively intact large Jewish community. Its Jewish population numbered nearly 800,000, including the approximately 100,000 converts who were identified as Jews under the racial laws then in effect. The many anti-Jewish laws and decrees notwithstanding, the Jews felt physically secure under the protection of the conservative-aristocratic government that ruled the country. “Civilized” antisemites as they were, the members of this government adopted a series of measures calculated drastically to curtail the influence of the Jews in the economic and cultural life of Hungary, but consistently rejected the demands of the Nazis and of their Hungarian accomplices to subject the Jews to a Final Solution program.

The protective shield of the conservative-aristocratic government ended with the “unexpected” German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944. The occupation shattered the illusions and rationalizations of the Jews as it did the political and military calculations of the Hungarians. Historically, one can make a case that the Jews of

Hungary were largely doomed because of the miscalculations by the very ruling conservative-aristocratic elite on whom they had relied for their physical protection.

The Political-Military Calculations of the Hungarians

While the chain of events that led to the German occupation was triggered by the unrealistic maneuverings of the conservative-aristocratic government during the second half of 1943 gradually to extricate Hungary from the Axis alliance, the ultimate root of the tragedy may be traced to the consequences of the First World War. Under the terms of the Trianon Treaty of 1920, Hungary emerged as the war's greatest loser: it lost two-thirds of its historic territory, one-third of the Magyar people, and three-fifths of its total population.

The counterrevolutionary regime that came to power that year under the leadership of Miklós Horthy consistently pursued a policy of revisionism aimed at undoing the "injustices" of Trianon. At first, this regime had hoped to achieve this objective with the support of the League of Nations and the Western democracies. Unsuccessful in this approach, it changed course shortly after the victory of the National Socialists in Germany in early 1933. Bent on destroying the world order based on the Treaty of Versailles, the Nazis launched an aggressive revisionist foreign policy that the Hungarians applauded and soon emulated. The synchronization of this foreign policy was solidified in 1935, when Hungary came under the leadership of a Germanophile government. With the increase in the economic and political penetration of Hungary by the Third Reich, the power of the Right extremists grew at a rapid pace. The virulently antisemitic campaign that was fueled by the many Nazi-financed extremist political parties and press organs prepared the ground for the adoption of ever harsher measures against the Jews. In the public discourse, the "solution" of the Jewish question soon acquired the same importance as the issue of revisionism. The two issues became intertwined to such an extent that the political elite, like the masses at large, came to be convinced that the success of their revisionist ambitions depended on the speedy solution of the Jewish question.

Hungary's revisionist foreign policy, pursued in tandem with that of the Third Reich, yielded its first positive result soon after the September 1938 signing of the Munich Pact, which led to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. In early November, Hungary was enabled to reacquire the Upper Province (*Felvidék*) and in March 1939 Carpatho-Ruthenia (*Kárpátalja*) from Czechoslovakia. In August–September 1940, it

acquired Northern Transylvania from Romania, and in April 1941, the Bacska area from Yugoslavia. Almost concurrently with each territorial acquisition, Hungary adopted major anti-Jewish laws, most of which were supported by the Christian Churches.

It was largely to preserve the newly acquired territories that Hungary joined Nazi Germany in the ill-fated war against the Soviet Union in late June 1941. Euphoric at first, the hopes of the Hungarians began to fade soon after the crushing defeat of their Second Army at Voronezh and of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad in early 1943. They became increasingly convinced that the Axis would lose the war. Their realization was reinforced in the summer of that year, when Italy—the Fascist ally to which they felt closer than they did to Nazi Germany—successfully extricated itself from the Axis alliance. Hungary became eager to follow the example of Italy in an “honorable” way without sacrificing its basic interests. Ignoring the geographic location of their country and its strategic importance for the Germans, the conservative-aristocratic elite developed a “secret” plan that proved fundamentally quixotic. With most of the details known to the Germans through their many spies, the Hungarians planned to surrender to the Western Allies exclusively. They feared the Soviets against whom they had launched an aggressive war and they abhorred Bolshevism even more than they disliked Nazism. Ignoring the military realities that fused together the Grand Alliance, the Hungarians rationalized that the Western Allies, who were also anti-Bolshevik, would open the long-awaited second front by invading Nazi-dominated Europe through the Balkans. By moving northward toward the Baltic States, they rationalized, the Western Allies would not only crush the Nazis, but also would prevent the western penetration of Bolshevism. Under these circumstances, they falsely believed, they could surrender exclusively to the Western Allies. In gratitude for their surrender, they secretly hoped, the Western democracies might even allow Hungary to retain the territories it had gained with the aid of the Nazis and perhaps even concur with the perpetuation of the antiquated but fiercely anti-communist regime.

Hungarian emissaries established contact with representatives of the Western Allies in Turkey and Italy. As these “secret” negotiations were going on in late 1943 and early 1944, the Hungarian government, led by Miklós Kállay, eased the severity of the anti-Jewish drive and adopted a series of political and military measures that clearly irritated the Germans. To defend their national interests, the Germans decided not to allow Hungary to follow the example of Italy. Such a step, in their assessment, would

not only deprive the Reich of the economic and military resources of Hungary, but also would interfere with the free flow of Romanian oil on which the German war machine depended, and cut off, if needed, a vital escape route for German forces deployed in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Motivated largely by political, strategic, and military considerations, in February 1944 Hitler completed his plans for the occupation of Hungary. He presented the Hungarian leaders with a *fait accompli* at a meeting in Schloss Klesheim on March 17–18. While the German occupation of Hungary of March 19 proved disastrous for most of the anti-Nazi conservative-aristocratic leaders, it proved fatal for the Jews.

“In retrospect,” to quote from an earlier study, “it appears that had Hungary continued to remain a militarily passive but politically vocal ally of the Third Reich instead of provocatively engaging in essentially fruitless, if not merely alibi-establishing, diplomatic maneuvers, the Jews of Hungary might possibly have survived the war relatively unscathed.”

The Calculations of the Germans

In contrast to the Hungarians, the Germans—realistic and in possession of overwhelming power—decided to protect their political and military interests. While the determining factor underlying the German decision to occupy Hungary was military, the planned “solution” of the Jewish question also played a crucial part. At first the Germans were not absolutely sure that the new government they planned to install in replacement of the “pro-Jewish” Kállay government would be ready to implement a Final Solution program. Some among the Nazis feared that, given the fragile military and international situation at the time, a new pro-German Hungarian government might decide to emulate Marshal Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, in dealing with the Jewish question and consider it a domestic issue. These Nazis were aware that while Antonescu was responsible for the death of approximately 300,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews in 1940–43, he nevertheless had rejected the Final Solution idea and “saved” most of the Jews of Old Romania and Southern Transylvania. They were fearful that Horthy, the Hungarian head of state, might act in the same vein.

The Eichmann-*Sondereinsatzkommando*, consisting of around one hundred members, arrived in Hungary with contingency plans. To their pleasant surprise, members of the newly established government of Döme Sztójay—all constitutionally

appointed by Horthy—outdid the SS in their eagerness to “solve” the Jewish question. Aware of the fast-approaching Soviet forces, the new government placed the instruments of state power—the police, gendarmerie, and civil service—at the disposal of the Germans and Hungarians in charge of the Final Solution. Since time was of the essence, the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices acted swiftly and decisively. In contrast to Poland, where the Nazis needed five years to “solve” the Jewish question, it took them less than four months in Hungary. Resolved to implement the Final Solution before the arrival of the Red Army, the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices subjected the Jews not only to the fastest but also the most horrifically barbaric process of destruction in the history of the Holocaust.

The Calculations and Rationalizations of the Jews

First a caveat: The calculations and rationalizations of the Jews notwithstanding, ultimate responsibility for the destruction of Hungarian Jewry must be borne exclusively by the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices. The German occupation of Hungary caught almost all Jews by surprise. Stunned and bewildered, they suddenly realized that all their calculations were about to go awry. At first, they continued to hope against hope that the new Hungarian government, which included many members of the previous conservative governments with Horthy continuing as head of state, would prevent the Nazis from implementing their sinister plans. But even if the Nazis were adamant, they argued, the Hungarians would resist because of the essential role the Jews were playing in the economy—an economy that was in the service of both the German and the Hungarian war effort. They also tended to believe that, given the “imminent and inevitable” victory of the Allies, the new Hungarian leaders would not expose themselves to criminal prosecution for war crimes after the war.

Fearful and apprehensive, the Jews continued to base their hope for survival on the leaders of Hungary. Their trust in the Hungarians, like their calculations and rationalizations, can to a large extent be traced to the perceptions they had formed during the “Golden Era” of Hungarian Jewry—the era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918).

During this period, the Jews of Hungary proudly identified themselves as “Magyars of the Israelite faith,” and had come to believe that a genuine symbiosis was forged between them and the Magyars. This belief can be traced to their embrace of the Magyar cause in the 1848–49 revolution against the Habsburgs. To the chagrin of the

major nationalities which had revolted against the Hungarians, the Jews assumed a disproportionate share of the military and economic burdens of the revolution that held out the promise of their emancipation. According to Lajos Kossuth, the enlightened leader of the revolution, approximately 20,000 of his army of 180,000 were Jewish—at a time when the Jews, numbering 340,000, represented but 3.7 percent of the total population of 9.2 million. Kossuth’s assertion was echoed by that of Mór Jókai, one of Hungary’s most celebrated authors. According to Jókai, “no ethnic-national group contributed so much in terms of their lives and wealth to the Hungarian struggle of independence as the Jews did.” With the revolution crushed and the Jews, like the Hungarians, penalized by the victorious Habsburgs, the issue of emancipation became—temporarily at least—moot.

It came to the fore again soon after the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. The Jews were emancipated that same year and, in accordance with the wishes of the Hungarian leaders of the revolution, many of them assimilated, acculturated, and even converted. With opportunities opened to them, the Jews soon came to play a leading role in the modernization of Hungary and achieved leading positions in business, banking, industry, and the professions. They also played an important role in the Hungarian kingdom’s political life by providing the slim majority the Magyars needed to rule over the co-inhabiting nationalities.

In the course of a relatively short time, the Jews, motivated not only by gratitude but also by conviction, became almost chauvinistic in their patriotism. According to Paul Ignatus, a noted Hungarian writer, “the Jews became...more fervently Magyar than the Magyars themselves.” Under the euphoric conditions of the Golden Era, few Hungarian Jews envisioned the possibility of any disaster in the future. There was one notable exception: the Budapest-born Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism. Herzl shared his misgivings about a possible ominous future of Hungarian Jewry with his friend Ernő Mezei, a member of the Hungarian Parliament. In a letter of 1903, Herzl wrote “The hand of fate shall also seize Hungarian Jewry. And the later this occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and hard shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape.”

The disaster of the First World War led to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and brought an end to the Golden Era of Hungarian Jewry. Ironically, Hungary became the first country in the postwar period to adopt an anti-Jewish law—the *Numerus Clausus Law* of 1920. Notwithstanding the many anti-Jewish

incidents that took place in the early 1920s and the pro-Reich policies the successive Hungarian governments had pursued after 1935, the Jews continued to cling to the perceptions they had formed during the Golden Era. They continued to believe that the leaders of Hungary, their pro-German foreign and domestic policies notwithstanding, would continue to protect the basic interests of their fellow “Magyars of the Jewish faith.” Some of them even rationalized the “need” for the adoption of some anti-Jewish measures as reflections of the “spirit of the times”—prudent measures designed to appease the Right extremists at home and the Nazis abroad. They continued to feel secure under the protection of the successive conservative-aristocratic governments, whose members had hated the Nazis and feared the local extremists almost as much as the Jews did. Many among these governmental figures had close and lucrative relations with Jewish bankers, business magnates, and industrialists, many of whom continued to prosper during the war. A few among these prominent, mostly converted Jews even had close social and personal ties to the Magyar conservative-aristocratic elite, including the head of state.

The German occupation revealed not only the basically quixotic character of the calculations of the Hungarians but also the fundamentally illusory nature of the perceptions and rationalizations of the Jews. While some members of the conservative-aristocratic elite were co-opted into the new pro-Nazi government, others went into hiding. Still others, including a relatively large number of the anti-Nazi opposition, were arrested and either jailed or deported to concentration camps.

The Jews were trapped. The Hungarians had abandoned them. The Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices in charge of the Final Solution lost no time. They worked out a program of two stages, each of which lasted for fifty-four days. During the first phase, lasting from the March 22 appointment of the Sztójay government until May 15, the Jews were subjected to an avalanche of anti-Jewish laws that resulted in their isolation, marking, expropriation, roundup, ghettoization, and concentration into entrainment centers. Few, if any of them had any inkling of the ultimate fate that was awaiting them.

During the second phase, lasting from May 15 through July 9, close to 440,000 of the Jews of Hungary were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where most of them were murdered soon after their arrival. By July 9, when Horthy’s decision to halt the deportations took effect and Raoul Wallenberg arrived on his rescue mission, all of Hungary (with the notable exception of Budapest) had become *judenrein*.

It was during the first phase that the leaders of Hungarian Jewry, partly on advice from their counterparts in Slovakia, conducted a series of negotiations with the SS in a vain attempt to save the Jews. Under the extremely dangerous conditions in which they were called upon to lead, apparently neither the Slovakian nor the Hungarian Jewish leaders realized that the local SS negotiators had no power to halt the Final Solution. They were agents carrying out a master program directed from Berlin and authorized to make only small-scale “deals” that would allow the survival of a few Jews against the payment of large sums and distract the attention of the Jewish masses from their impending doom. Abandoned by the Hungarians, the Jewish leaders desperately tried to win a “race with time,” hoping for liberation by the Red Army, by entering into dragged-out negotiations with the local SS masters. Each day that passed while the Jews still were in their homes, even though marked and impoverished, was a gain in that race. The SS negotiators were fully aware of this tactic and played along, pocketing a large amount of money and valuables and raising false hopes among the Jews. The SS, supported by their Hungarian accomplices, had all the trump cards and continued to “negotiate” while proceeding with the implementation of the Final Solution according to their own well-planned schedule.

It was toward the end of this phase, when the Hungarian authorities “illegally” began the ghettoization of the Jews in Carpatho-Ruthenia and northeastern Hungary (April 16) and cooperated with the Germans in the deportation of the first two transports of “able-bodied” Jews to Auschwitz (April 28–29) that the Jewish leaders realized that they had been “betrayed” by their negotiating partners. Powerless, they felt that they had no alternative but to continue the negotiations in a desperate effort to save as many Jews as possible. These negotiations had an international component, like the grandiose “blood for trucks” offer, which the Nazis designed primarily to distract the attention of the Jews from the tragic fate awaiting them and to bring about a possible split in the Grand Alliance.

In contrast to this approach, which was doomed to failure from the beginning, the negotiations at the local level proved more successful. By paying a high ransom in cash and valuables, the Jewish negotiators managed to save a relatively small number of Jews. While it is quite possible that in the absence of these negotiations these Jews might also have been deported, their rescue versus the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews, who had been kept in the dark about the “great secret,” became the source of heated debates after the war. It emerged as one of the most controversial chapters in the

history of the Holocaust. The barricades are still manned by the supporters and opponents of these rescue activities—a historical debate that is likely to continue for many years to come.

As to the three entities involved in this unprecedented tragedy of the Jewish people: The Third Reich that was supposed to last for a thousand years was crushed; Hungary was forced to give up the territories it had gained with the aid of the Nazis and once again was restricted to the boundaries set at Trianon; the Jews of Hungary suffered close to 560,000 casualties. Of the approximately 300,000 survivors many immigrated to and finally found a significant measure of *real* security in the State of Israel.

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