

## Book Review

*How It Happened: Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry.* By Ernő Munkácsi. Edited by Nina Munk. McGill-Queen's University Press. 2018. iv + 314pp. Can\$34.95.

Of the many controversies surrounding the history of the Holocaust, one of the most persistent revolves around the complicity of non-Nazi German individuals, organisations and states in the mass persecution and murder of Europe's Jews. The activities of German-allied and German-occupied countries, the comportment of non-Jewish 'bystanders', and even the conduct of the Jewish communities themselves – epitomised by enduring debates on the role of the *Judenräte* (Jewish councils) – all continue to capture historiographical imaginaries, spurring reflections on the Holocaust's lasting significance for European societies today. Placed at the confluence of such critical debates, Ernő Munkácsi's *How It Happened: Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry*, offers a fascinating and highly significant account of the fate of Hungary's Jews between Germany's invasion of Hungary on 19 March 1944 and the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross Party's seizure of power on 15 October 1944. Written in 1947 from the perspective of the former secretary of the chief Hungarian *Judenrat* – and expertly translated, edited and commented in this edition by McGill-Queen's University Press – Munkácsi's book further represents a critical, multilayered historiographical attempt to grapple with some of the Holocaust's key questions of culpability, responsibility and agency.

As the historian Ferenc Laczó states in his eloquent contextualising chapter, Munkácsi's book 'belongs to a somewhat unusual, mixed genre' (p. xxxiii). Writing in his native Hungarian language in the aftermath of the Second World War, Munkácsi aimed to 'commit to paper certain episodes' of those critical months in 1944 that ultimately saw the deportation of over 437,000 Jews from Hungary, most of whom perished in Auschwitz. As Munkácsi explains in his introduction, he felt 'a need – indeed an obligation' to offer the 'truth' and 'open the eyes of the public to allow a glimpse of historic reality' (pp. 7–8). Drawing both on first-hand experiences, often presented in a 'neutral' third-person narrative, and documents he had salvaged from the archives of the National Office of Hungarian Israelites, Munkácsi's account focuses on the activities of the Budapest-based Hungarian Central Jewish Council, from its forced inception under Adolf Eichmann's authority in March 1944 until Regent Miklós Horthy's abdication in October 1944. Munkácsi's privileged perspective on wartime events, as the Jewish Council's former secretary general, constitutes a double-edged sword, as Laczó convincingly argues in his opening chapter. On the one hand, Munkácsi's intricate knowledge of the Jewish Council's perceptions and actions grants readers profound insight into the distressing balancing act played by Europe's *Judenräte* between complying with and challenging National Socialist authority, all in the hope of saving as many Jews as possible. On the

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other hand, Munkácsi's account is steeped in a desire for exoneration. Faced both by Hungary's post-war People's Courts, which questioned Munkácsi's wartime conduct (p. lxix), and by mounting criticism among the Jewish community, who claimed that he could have done more to save the Jews (pp. x, xxxi), Munkácsi's narrative must be read with prudence. How much the Council knew of unfolding Holocaust atrocities – and *ipso facto* what should have been done based on this knowledge – lies at the heart of Munkácsi's book, and of larger ongoing debates on the role of the *Judenräte*.

As in the accounts of other Jewish council officials, Munkácsi's book powerfully illustrates the 'choiceless choices' (Lawrence L. Langer, cited on p. x) faced by Europe's *Judenräte*. Installed by order of the Sonder Einsatzkommando Eichmann as 'the sole organ through which the SS would communicate with the Jews' (p. 21), Hungary's Jewish Council quickly became charged with organising the country's Jewish communities at the behest of the German and, eventually, the Hungarian authorities. As such, the Council was made responsible, even in the earliest days of the German occupation, for organising forced labour crews (p. 34), 'requisitioning' Jewish apartments (p. 58), and providing goods, food and other resources to the Gestapo (p. 66). The Council's compliance, Munkácsi highlights, had diverse origins. On the one hand, many nursed a 'culpable optimism' (p. 94): particularly 'the Jewish community elders . . . entertained the illusion that Hungary would be the exception, a tiny foothold of an island in a sea of Jewish devastation' (p. 12), leading to a 'ruinous' and 'infinite naïveté' (p. 17). On the other hand, the Council was directly threatened with 'fatal consequences for the entire Jewish community of Hungary' (p. 46) should they not comply. Working with 'the Germans', many reasoned, would help stave off the worst (p. 66).

As Munkácsi reveals, attitudes among Hungary's Jewish community varied considerably, leading to numerous responses. Hungary's Zionists, epitomised by Rezső Kasztner, drew on international contacts to attempt *alijah* and emigration (pp. 67, 215–18). Others, hoping to save their own lives, converted to Christianity (p. 219). Faced by ever more gruesome reports of the deportation of Jews from the Hungarian countryside and the leaking of the Auschwitz Protocols (pp. 104–32), a subsection of the Council, including Munkácsi, even circulated an underground pamphlet appealing for aid from Hungary's Christian citizens (pp. 141–6). For the most part, however, the Council restricted itself to pleading and petitioning for help from the Hungarian government, the Christian Churches and the diplomatic missions of the neutral countries. In some cases – as with the issuing of protective papers through Raoul Wallenberg's Swedish diplomatic mission (pp. 220–6) or the deportations' temporary halt due to Horthy's protest in July 1944 (pp. 204, 257–9) – such measures seemed to have had an effect. Ultimately, however, the Jewish Council's actions remained in vain. As Munkácsi's book shows, and as current historical scholarship underlines, the activities and decisions of Jewish councils 'tended to make hardly any difference with respect to the devastating outcomes' (p. xxx). Regardless of the Council's activities, Hungary's Jews lay at the mercy of the Nazi German and Hungarian authorities, the Holocaust's countless henchmen and profiteers, and the large-scale indifference of the Christian majority society.

*How It Happened* is crucial reading for scholars of the Holocaust. As one of the first works on the Holocaust in Hungary, Munkácsi's text helps dispel

the myth that the immediate post-war period was a moment of testimonial and historiographical silence. To some extent both primary and secondary source, the book probes key controversies in Holocaust Studies, while opening perspectives on the development of the field as such. This English-language edition, furthermore, skilfully contextualises Munkácsi's work by providing a preface by the editor, Nina Munk, an introductory chapter by Ferenc Laczó, a biographical essay on Ernő Munkácsi by Susan M. Papp, twenty-six telling and carefully commented photographs, a range of expertly drafted historical maps, and a glossary and incisive textual annotations by Ferenc Laczó and László Csősz. As such, the book will not only serve as an important reference work on the Holocaust in Hungary, but will also inspire critical debates on the legacy and historiography of the Holocaust more broadly.

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