
This monograph by István Deák goes against the conventional narratives of World War II. The widely accepted accounts of the war which were established after 1945 won approval from the major participants in it in no small part because these accounts were convenient. According to these narratives, World War II was basically a struggle between the “democratic” and the “fascist” powers. Furthermore, a special but popular exculpatory interpretation was established as a kind of subplot of these stories which held significant sway until the 1960s, according to which ordinary German people were not responsible for Nazi crimes, as these crimes had been committed by the Nazis who “captured” ordinary Germans as well. The Polish took a privileged position in the remembrance of World War II because they could be represented entirely as victims, and the Poles did not miss the opportunity to portray themselves as martyrs. However, several books have been published since the mid-1990s (for instance Christopher Browning’s Ordinary Men about the role of “ordinary” Germans in the Holocaust or Jan T. Gross’ work on the massacre in Jedwabne) which undermine these interpretations (which have enjoyed a significant degree of consensus). The new monograph by István Deák, professor emeritus at Columbia University, fits in this recent trend in the secondary literature. The keywords of his book (as one can see from its title) are collaboration, resistance, and retribution, and he is more interested in the limit situations of everyday life during the war than in major war operations, in no small part because he has personal experience of them. His brother-in-law and idol Béla Stollár, an antifascist journalist and member of the resistance in Hungary, was killed in 1944 by members of the Hungarian Arrow-Cross Party, which ruled the country as a pro-Nazi puppet government at the time. Deák also shares with his reader the latest results of research on World War II, offering new perspectives on various key issues.

In clear opposition to revisionist works, István Deák’s book rehearses the traditional interpretation of the outbreak of the war. According to this interpretation, the war was launched consciously by Hitler in order to colonize the territories of Eastern Europe and destroy the Jewish communities there: “the extermination of the Jews, as a war goal, at least equaled the goal of winning the war” (p.134).
In their ambition to exterminate the Jews, Germans could count on the assistance of locals. Perhaps the most important and also provocative and unpalatable statement of the book is Deák’s assertion that, “if there was one major European project, it was ethnic cleansing” (p.10). With this assertion, Deák deprives the Holocaust of its aura of “incomprehensibility” and supposed uniqueness in the sense that he places it in a series of ethnic cleansings, which he describes as the logical, if radical consequence of the absolutization of the idea of the “organic” nation state. He thus links the deportation of the Jews to the expulsion of the East European Germans after World War II, without, however, intending to relativize. Another link between the deportation (or in the case of the Jews of Europe, the deportation and massacre) of both scapegoated ethnic groups was the redistribution of properties and wealth, i.e. the governmental practice of bribing or rewarding “desirable” social groups by redistributing the stolen property of the victims and thereby making these social groups accomplices.

Collaboration with Hitler’s Germany allowed countries to realize their “national” goals, which included territorial acquisitions, ethnic homogenization (or “cleansing”), and taking possession of the property of people who lost their civil rights and later their lives. Deák does not mute his critical view of the Hungarian “gentry middle-class,” which he sees as the greatest beneficiary of the Holocaust in Hungary. Hungary realized each of the aforementioned goals (at least, in the case of territorial acquisitions, for a time), and this may explain why the Hungarian elite did not turn its back on Germany even on the verge of certain defeat and Soviet occupation.

Deák characterizes the attitude of European leaders and citizens during the years before World War II and in the first period of the conflagration as political and moral bankruptcy, and he maintains that the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia was the moral nadir. (It is worth noting that, as a consequence of the decision in Munich, a huge part of the European military industry was given to Germany.) Deák does observe (and contributions like this make Europe on Trial a revelatory book) that food rations were better in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (created in 1939) than in Germany. Moreover, “the survival rate among Czech males [was] much higher than among Sudeten German males,” as Czech males were not recruited for military service (p.34). During the German occupation, the Czech public administration functioned like the public administration of ‘an eminent allied state,’ even without ideological identification. This phenomenon was not specific to the Czech lands: Germans trusted “obedient bureaucrats”
over “new Nazis” in almost every country. The “new Nazis” were given power only as a last resort, for instance in Hungary with the coup by Ferenc Szálasi and his Arrow Cross Party in October, 1944.

Deák continues to complicate and undermine the traditional narrative according to which the European countries could be divided into “bad” and “good” countries, active “conquerors” and passive “victims.” He points out how the allies, above all Italy, typically caused more problems for Germany than the occupied countries. Denmark, which tends to be idealized because it saved its Jewish citizens, even entered the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1941.

Operation Barbarossa was not a preventive attack, as revisionist authors tend to claim, but a direct consequence of Hitler’s explicit aim: the desire to acquire Lebensraum. However, in spite of the Nazi racial theory (according to which Slavs were subhuman), many locals helped the invaders, especially in territories which had been occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939/40.

A contention characteristic of Deák’s ambition to avoid and challenge simplification is his observation about people who are usually referred to as “partisans” and who were uniformly idealized by the Soviet propaganda as “antifascist heroes.” Deák insists that these people (and the groups of which they were part) conducted ethnic cleansing similar to the German genocide. The various partisan groups fought against one another on several occasions, and the fault lines in these conflicts were based on perceived ethnic difference. The Jewish inhabitants of Timothy Snyder’s Bloodlands were targets not only of the German invaders, but also of the nationalistic and anti-Semitic partisan groups, for instance of Ukrainian nationalists, who simultaneously fought both the Germans and the Soviets.

Deák makes the bold claim that serious resistance in the countries of the West only began in 1943, when, after the German defeat at Stalingrad, it began to seem possible that Germany might lose the war. As the resistance groups did not hesitate to commit attacks that typically prompted German acts of revenge against civilians, any evaluation of the acts of these groups must grapple with serious moral dilemmas. Excellent examples of this include the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich or the contested case of the Italian communists who exploded a bomb at Via Rasella in Rome in March 1944.

Assessments of the practices of retributions after World War II are even more contested. Europe on Trial gives a panoramic overview of the various attempts at retribution in every single country after the war, and it reminds the reader that several prime ministers of Hungary were executed, whereas
German Plenipotentiary and key Holocaust perpetrator Edmund Veesenmayer spent only a short period of time in prison and went on to become a successful businessman in West Germany. As Deák writes, “The great irony of history is that whereas Eastern Europe paid a heavy price for its political purges and its ethnic cleansing, Germany, which hardly had any purges and received millions of German and other refugees, soon became a model democracy and the motor of the postwar European economy” (p.223). Of course, the main explanation for the lack of adequate retribution in West Germany remains the outbreak of the Cold War, in which West Germans became “valuable allies” for the Atlantic Powers (p.193). From this perspective, the West German “economic miracle,” which enabled Germany to become the engine of the Common Market (the predecessor to the European Union), was launched and operated by Nazis who could (and should) have been punished for their war crimes. From this point of view, the “Adenauer Deal” was problematic on ethical grounds, but one could well claim that history has justified the acts of politicians “who had dreamed of a new, unified, and better Europe” (p.229), to close my review with the final words of Deák’s provocative book. It will make an interesting and informative reading for anyone who would like to learn more, easily and quickly, about the most recent findings of the scholarship on the history of World War II.

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