

Book review: Bálint Hóman and his trial at the People's Court

Pető, Andrea

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pető, A. (2020). Book review: Bálint Hóman and his trial at the People's Court. [Review of the book *Hóman Bálint és népbírósági pere*, ed. by G. Ujváry]. *Hungarian Historical Review*, 9(3), 583-586. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-73094-5>

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Hóman Bálint és népbíróági pere [Bálint Hóman and his trial at the People's Court]. Edited by Gábor Ujváry. Budapest: Ráció Kiadó; Székesfehérvár: Városi Levéltár és Kutatóintézet, 2019. 668 pp.

Bálint Hóman (1885–1951) a long-serving Minister of Culture of the Horthy regime, became a recent symbol of “historical revisionism.” By revisionism, I am referring not only to the revisions of indictments made by the people's court after 1945 but also to the history of the period between 1945 and 1989 and thus, indirectly, to the attempt to revalue the whole period before 1945, which is a constitutive part of the memory politics of illiberal regimes. A thick volume entitled *Historical Revisionism* was also published in 2011. It was edited by Gábor Ujváry, a founding member of the controversial government-sponsored Veritas Historical Institute and Archive, in which the most outstanding contemporary Hungarian historians presented Hóman as a historian, a public collection specialist (as he was the director of the National Museum), and a politician while also examining his networks of valuable contacts (without which his upward career would have been unthinkable) and his connection to Székesfehérvár. However, this edited volume did not bring any closure on the subject. Rather, it was followed in 2015 by the ultimately failed plan to erect a statue of Hóman and, in 2016, the also failed lawsuit against the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia – MTA), which demanded the restoration of Hóman's MTA membership.

The volume under review, which offers the text of the documents in Bálint Hóman's people's court files and analyses of these documents surprisingly begins with a detailed, almost hundred-page, extremely thoroughly compiled chronology (pp.11–108). Although there are usually chronologies at the end of publications of historical sources, this chronology at the beginning of the volume provides a primary framework for interpreting the publication: the volume sticks to sources and facts and seeks to give the impression of a scholarly endeavor that is objective, clearly substantiated, and apolitical. The chronology and bibliography of Hóman's works are followed by Tibor Zinner's 40-page study on the history of the people's courts. The basic tenet of illiberal “revisionist historiography” is the emphasis on the need for a fresh start on the grounds that, until the work we have in our hands now was written, no one had dealt with the topic being analyzed. Zinner, who published his first work on the history of people's courts already in 1983, also uses this topos. Another reflection on the history of the people's court by Zsolt Horváth (which for some reason is at the end of the

volume) mentions only the book by Tibor Lukács published in 1979 as the only summarizing work on the topic.

The volume contains two introductions concerning the people's courts and one about the 2015 retrial. This is followed by material from the people's court case in 1946. The real starting point of the volume is the thorough research work carried out by Gábor Ujváry as an expert for the case in 2015 (pp.537–610) and his analysis of the public debate (pp.162–99). This is followed by the documents of a court case in 1946 and then the 2015 trial.

The larger, more substantial part of the volume (about 300 pages) is the thoroughly annotated publication of the documents of the People's Court. The rules concerning the publication of these documents are explained in a preface to the collection (as is fitting). In this volume, the studies about the court case exceed in length the documents of the court case themselves, so the reader gets two loosely connected books. The largest theoretical problem of the volume is the authors' ambiguous attitude towards the empirical source of the volume, i.e. the minutes of the people's court proceedings.

Anyone who has ever worked with people's court documents knows this is a very challenging genre. The materials from a single case are sometimes held in different archives, and it can be extremely difficult to determine what documents the people's court used and often how it used them. The version of the Hóman court case published in the book was also created by merging two archival files (one from the Budapest City Archives, the other from the Historical Archives of the State Security Services). It is therefore strange that the documents' archival references are completely missing and, furthermore, that there is no reference to the missing materials that have been removed from the files in the meantime.

There are other methodological and theoretical problems which the authors fail to raise concerning the genre of people's court protocols as a source. The first problem concerns the transitional nature of the institution of the people's court itself. In an ever-changing legal environment, the authorities ran and used an institution which gained its legitimacy precisely from its ignorance of this constant change.

The second problem concerns the fact that, as is true in all court sources, since these kinds of written sources are available, they can be analyzed in two ways. The first approach is to consider these lawsuits as theatrical productions in which the actors performed the events of their past for the audience and the community according to the rules they thought were known. This, of course, had political consequences. In the case of the Hungarian people's courts, for

example, if the defendants were female, they referred to themselves as “weak women” and were usually given lighter sentences for crimes for which a male defendant would have been given a more seriously punishment.¹ Hóman tried to use this tactic. According to the interrogating investigators’ summary report he behaved “womanly”: “[He] describes his role as insignificant, denies his influence, and omits from his role the moments that show his unbroken German friendship, fascist attitude, and anti-Semitic attitude throughout.” (p.210) He was not successful, given the court’s politics and context. In other cases, defendants try to arouse emotions. Female defendants, for instance, may try crying. In the case of Hóman, however, the “old woman’s complaint” (p.210), his strategy to portray himself as a victim, which is also mentioned in the report, did not help and may have hurt him. In this interpretive framework, the emphasis is on the fact that the trial, regardless of whether it happened incidentally in the transitional justice system of the extraordinary transitional period, never returns “the truth.”

The other methodological approach typical of this volume is to consider what was happening in the court as “objective.” The courts as institutions of post-World War II political justice did not function in this manner. The publication insists on factual accountability of the people’s courts with great commitment and a huge footnote apparatus. This interpretation, even if consistent in its own methodological approach, would still be questionable. First of all, it is not clear that the lawyers, police officers, and investigators working in Budapest (a city largely in ruins) in 1945 and 1946 can be expected to have the same insights, knowledge, and source knowledge that today’s researchers have. Second, this approach is inconsistent in the volume. For example, the investigative report of November 29, 1945 mentions 147 pieces of attached evidence in support of the allegations against Hóman, on which the volume does not reflect here. It is incumbent on the historian who is editing the text not simply to check and (quite legitimately) criticize the professionalism of the people’s courts but also to explain why and how this kind of legal institution and procedure developed. Analyses of large, highly symbolic court cases like the Hóman hearing, however, are not suitable for this purpose.²

1 See more on this: Andrea Pető, *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party. Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in the Second World War* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2020).

2 See more Ildikó Barna, and Andrea Pető, *Political Justice in Budapest after World War II* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2015).

In this review, I would not go into the controversial points of judging Hóman's professional life, which was extensively analyzed in the 2011 volume. The volume under review is interesting in part because it returns to the pre-2011 framework without meaningfully reflecting on the failure to erect a statue of Hóman and the failure to rehabilitate him as a historian and scholar. The book seems to have been intended as a monument of sorts, like a book to create a memory of the trial.

The volume concludes with a history of attempts to rehabilitate Hóman, analyzing the process that resulted in neither the erection of a statue of Hóman nor the restoration of his membership in Hungarian Academy of Sciences. István Varga (FIDESZ MP), who has been the political engine behind the rehabilitation of Hóman in recent decades, gained significant space in this part of the volume. In his writing, Varga puts himself at the center of these attempts, saying “without the two-thirds parliamentary majority, I would have found it much harder to take up the obstacles” (p.505). Thus, the legal process of rehabilitation became just as much a political process as the verdict against Hóman in 1946. When the volume mercilessly and meticulously footnotes the court case, it fights a battle that it had already lost when it was launched.

Andrea Pető
Central European University