

ELIZA ABLOVATSKI, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe: The Deluge of 1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

A relevant contributor to the contemporary historiography of Central and Eastern Europe, Eliza Ablovatski has created an interdisciplinary body of work, drawing from the fields of gender studies, Jewish history, oral history and interwar era violence, both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary. Her extensive articles, characterised by a crucial transnational approach, have become essential instruments in the further understanding of Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War I. A remarkable continuation of Ablovatski's previous efforts, her latest book is constructed as a comparative study concerning two spatial settings observed in the same chronological context, namely Munich and Budapest in 1919. Their inherent particularities aside, both urban centres underwent quite similar transformations, telling an insightful "tale of two revolutionary cities" (p. 1). In the spirit of its introductory motto, the historical narrative with Dickensian tones compellingly captures a moment of ambivalent change amidst the unravelling of revolution and war.

However dire the circumstances, 1919 is described as a period rich with feelings of immense possibility, animated by a silent belief: the world could yet be forged anew, "remade, reimagined and reformed" (p. 2). This striving towards total reconstruction was perceived by some not as mere possibility, but as historical imperative, anticipating intergenerational violence, as the innovative concepts of revolution were suspended between the old, collapsed world and the emerging order. Although ephemeral in the bigger picture, the only successful revolutionary movements on the continent were in Munich and Budapest, as the spectre of Russia was looming over Europe. Their "lasting effects on the politics and culture of post-war society" (p. 3) were not diminished by a merciless armed counterrevolution.

Throughout the book, accounts of both revolutions are reconstructed through various sources such as publications, propaganda material, court depositions, private correspondence, memoirs and retrospective accounts. Through its critical interpretation, the comparative analysis focuses on how the developments of 1918-1919 were internalised by those who experienced them, uncovering a "double vision that many contemporaries had about the events, believing multiple and even conflicting narratives of the revolutions' viability, danger and importance" (p. 16). Conversely, opposing perspectives resulted in profoundly contradictory worldviews, calling revolution ephemeral or everlasting, revolutionary leaders deceptive charlatans or charismatic figures, revolutionary regimes ludicrous absurdities or existential threats.

The first chapter outlines the "urban fabrics" of Munich and Budapest. The author unequivocally rejects the "breaks with the past" proclaimed by these revolutions. Ablovatski illustrates them as stages in a series of developments instead. This approach is particularly

valuable, as it operates outside the frames of mind employed by the analysed subjects. The focus shifts on general context, dealing with the new reasoning of the 19th century.

Budapest was eloquently labelled by large segments of Hungarian society as a “foreign behemoth grafted onto traditional, agrarian Hungary” (p. 24). Hungarian nationalism, a strong undercurrent since the Austro-Hungarian period, openly manifested when the imperial establishment collapsed. Simultaneously, the expansive demographic growth turned Budapest into a true metropolis, home to spectacular ethnic and religious diversity. As assimilated non-Magyars emerged through the ranks of political and financial circles, an underlying propensity for prejudice reinforced the stereotypical image of the Other and gave rise to antisemitism, with visible similarities to the late German Empire. The ascension of middle-class government bureaucrats and professionals disturbed the rigid social hierarchy, while a proletariat of precarious political orientation rose to prominence from the other side of the spectrum. The social puzzle organised as such, the national context presented a “flourishing bourgeois civic culture” in tension with the “ossified, elite-dominated political culture” (p. 33).

Munich also depicted scenes of rapid growth and flourishing modernism, with strikingly similar interwoven strands of nationalism and imperialism, infliction of political power and striving for social reform, tensions between urban centres and remote rural areas. The constant inflow of Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century raised continuous concerns regarding their assimilation and a “foreign” metamorphosis of the city. Like Budapest, Munich was seen as a centre of the bourgeoisie, an imbalanced mixture of low and high culture, where a growing workers’ movement, with socialist representation, defiantly opposed traditional conservatism and the preservation of a Catholic Bavarian identity within a Protestant empire.

The intertwined dynamics of war and revolution come into play in the second chapter. The comparative approach extends diachronically and thematically. As demonstrated through analogies, the experience of war was redefining for both spaces.

In Hungary, the tremendous human loss was followed by profound resentment towards the outcome of peace, hence the prevalent myth of national martyrdom. The tragedy of war coming to a close, the October Revolution brought a relatively peaceful establishment of the National Council. The emerging republic, however, was condemned by the soviet-style organisations and ultranationalist units, both exploiting the collective experience of defeat, humiliation and loss of territory. The radicalism of socialism and proto-fascism determined the collapse of Mihály Karólyi’s national government. Power was surrendered to the socialist-communist party of Béla Kun, the Soviet Republic was proclaimed on the 21st of March 1919 and the newly assembled Hungarian Red Army resumed fighting the Romanians in Transylvania, albeit unsuccessfully. The fragile context gave way to the counter-revolutionary army in Szeged, led by Miklós Horthy, fully manifesting the force of the White Terror. The Soviet Republic collapsed under inner and outer pressure. The Romanian army occupied the country in August and the revolution ended in November. Horthy entered Budapest, established a heterogenous “Christian and National” coalition government and ruled *manu militari* until October 1944.

In Bavaria, war was initially unanimously supported, although “fantasies of national unity” (p. 59) would soon prove to be false. The exhausting conflict turned 1918 into a period of worsening economic conditions, continuous attacks and turmoil. The “revolution from above” ended the military dictatorship of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, but the collapse was deeply felt in Bavaria. The Wittelsbach dynasty abdicated and the charismatic socialist Kurt Eisner proclaimed the Independent Republic, *Freistaat Bayern*. Meanwhile, leftist tensions were growing on a national scale, leading to a climax. In January 1919, the KPD revolutionary attempt led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg was crushed by far-right paramilitaries and degenerated into massacre. In Bavaria, Eisner managed to maintain a fragile peace, by holding free elections in January, when his faction was firmly rejected. It was a fatal defeat: the delayed transfer of power led to his assassination in February. The spiral of violence resembled the one in Hungary. It allowed for the establishment of a short-lived second Soviet council in mid-April, led by Max Levien and Eugen Leviné from KPD. The Freikorps violently removed them on the 1st of May 1919.

Following these diachronic expositions, the analysis insists that both the victims of revolution and counter-revolution be approached, since “political violence and political justice intertwined” (p. 66), to different extents. In Munich, almost all violence occurred within an urban environment and the counter-revolutionary atrocities of the Freikorps explicitly targeted civilians. In Hungary, the brutality was much more substantial (a notably greater number of deaths) on the outskirts and in remote areas, rather than in Budapest itself.

The analogy remains significant when it comes to counter-revolution caused damage. Its extent, however, is still under debate. Ablovatski mostly blames the controversial nature of the gathered data. Historiographical contributions and reports promoted disingenuous narratives, often ideological, biased, apologetic or fragmentary, which caused significant variations in numbers and conflicting approximations. To a large extent, Cold War accounts have influenced memorial reconstructions, as Bavaria remained in the West, while Hungary became part of the Eastern Bloc. Two historiographical contexts allowed for the Red Terror versus White Terror dynamic to be dogmatically interpreted.

The third chapter provides several insightful studies regarding the accounts of violence. It observes the intricate development of physical terror and discourse projection through the “revolutionary scripts”. The development of revolutionary rhetoric is deconstructed through carefully selected case studies. The vocabulary based on a French Revolution and Paris Commune model undergoes a philological inspection. The language employed marks a connection between the local events in Munich and Budapest and other global events. Certain code words and euphemisms were common in speech: “Red” and “White Terror”, “Spartacist”, “Jacobin”, “White Guards”, all functioning as “prescriptive”, not “descriptive” (p. 80). Rather than expressing a reality, they convey a hyperbolic meaning. Some observations throughout the chapter concern the nature of revolution as well. They counter its view of justice, as far as the function of tribunals is concerned. Red courts have served a double purpose: “one revolutionary, in actually radically transforming society, and one governmental, in maintaining and protecting order” (p. 105). Nevertheless, this distinction was

particularly ignored by counter-revolutionary retaliation, which “pursued a mirror court of political justice” (pp. 105-106) and delivered a wave of antisemitic repressions and gender-targeted violence, extrajudicial arrests, illegal imprisonments and executions

The fourth chapter returns to the core issue of justice and analyses the political, legal, administrative and judicial consequences of the revolutionary events in Munich and Budapest. The rightfully called “unofficial «people’s justice»” (p. 120) had supreme reign, while a volunteer police (Freikorps, MOVE) ruled over the ruins of revolution until governments reasserted their monopoly over the use of force.

While interpreting the events they were judging, post-revolutionary courts compiled experiences and memories into “collective revolutionary scripts” (p. 124). Their sentences did not merely deliver justice, but also created “a public forum for discussion of the revolutions and their meaning” (p. 128). In Bavaria, the famous trial of Eugen Leviné perfectly illustrates what memorial manufacturing is. Leviné was the epitome of the Jewish Bolshevik (Russian descent, genuine revolutionary convictions, infamous Communist association) and was executed after a controversial condemnation to capital punishment. In Hungary, trials targeted both actions and words that were considered against the regime (statements, speeches and declarations of support for the revolutionary cause). “Laws did not differentiate between words and deeds” (p. 157), as proves the case of Géza Zerniczy, sentenced to 4 years in jail for “verbal support of the revolutionary government”.

The fifth chapter explores the image of womanhood as presented by gender studies and based on its several correlations with the revolution. Gender, race and class definitely influenced collective memory. Here, Ablovatski’s work argues that gender differences, among other aspects, were used as instruments to justify political violence, backing up the post-revolutionary order. There was a conflict between two opposite representations of women – the “unwomanly” revolutionaries and the obedient homemakers – both illustrated through accounts of women on trial. The focus lies on virtue, norms of gender expression, so-called Jewishness, modern looks associated with “Bolshevik fashion” etc. A significant part of the chapter takes insight from Klaus Theweleit. His psychoanalytical research described the worldview of the Freikorps concerning fundamental concepts such as woman, sexuality, violence and order. His comprehensive line of thought is perfectly compatible with Ablovatski’s research, as demonstrates her choice of primary resources. Theweleit’s discoveries “were representative of the symbolic vocabulary of a wide section of interwar society in both Germany and Hungary” (p. 193).

The sixth and final chapter goes further into memorial implications and asserts that “for both the Left and the Right, the events of 1919 became a founding myth, providing a foundation for a collective identity” (p. 206). The dependency of local events on pre-existing ideological structures determined their assimilation into broader “cultural and political debates about society, modernization, and justice” (p. 207), hence their unilateral association with collective identities. Ablovatski applies Halbwachs’ theories of memory. The strong influence of social context allows for traumatic events to have multiple versions, linked to their communities of origin.

The Right wing was superficial and subjective when evoking the historical spectres of terror. Leviné was presented as a modern-day Robespierre and a faithful follower of Raoul Rigault. Munich and Budapest were compared to Paris during the bloody months of the Commune. Béla Kun was dismissed as a lesser Desmoulins and Hungarian revolutionaries were critically described as copycats of the French revolutionaries. In the same spirit, revolutionary ideals were linked to psychiatric conditions, namely disorders such as “hysteria”, “mass neurosis” and “war exhaustion”. In addition, there was a constant presumption that the Left presented a latent revolutionary danger, even when the German Republic was endangered by the Kapp Putsch, the Freikorps and the Beerhall Putsch.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Left restlessly pointed out the genuine nature of its revolutions, which had “justified both individual actions, as well as the resulting loss of life and destruction” (p. 226). A cult of heroes and martyrs emerged in Bavaria and Hungary. The commemorative events outlined the resemblance between their fates and the tragic destiny of average workers. The atrocity of the White Terror was revealed through graphic representations, posters, drawings and works of art. The legacy of Kun became a very delicate subject in the Soviet context (he would eventually be purged by the Stalinist regime), given the Comitern’s tendency towards centralization, which rejected any kind of collaboration with reformist leftists and retrospectively denounced the revolutions in Bavaria and Hungary. By contrast, Leviné became a unifying figure for the Bavarian communists, while the national press abounded with accounts of memorial battles.

The conclusions of this analysis are as edifying as the narrative itself. Looking back, both revolutionary events have been experienced as components of political chaos adding up to personal trauma. They were therefore perceived and interpreted on a personal level. The psychological and memorial implications of the revolutions had a significant impact on the inter-war order, as well as on the debates regarding race, gender, social, political integrity and ultimately the nature of modernity.

There is one reflection which lives up to the challenge posed by the understanding of 1919: if undoubtedly unique on their own, the revolutions show their value when fitted into a broader context. Eliminating their “exceptional” aura, the study provides a refreshing alternative to the rigid political and national historic literature and collective memory. It is an endeavour which Eliza Ablovatski’s book fully accomplishes.

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