THE BLOGS

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FEATURED POST

Grand inquisition or historiography: Paul Bogdanor’s old-new take on the Kasztner saga

A new 'definitive' work indicting the Hungarian accused of Nazi-collaboration does not deliver on its claim

Rudolph Kasztner at his trial in Israel. (Courtesy)

The name Rezső (later: Israel) Kasztner means very little to most people around the world, but it is a household name for controversy and acrimonious debate in Holocaust studies. Kasztner was the key player in the collective leadership of the Va'ada, a group of Jewish rescue activists in German-occupied Budapest which bargained over human lives, offering cash, valuables, goods, contacts or promises of postwar alibis as a collateral. In May 1944 one of the members of this group, Joel Brand, was dispatched to Turkey by the SS, to offer hundreds of thousands of Jews to the Anglo-Americans, in exchange for trucks and other goods.

Ever since, a debate has raged around the issue whether there was any substance to this offer: while some argue that this was a mere ruse to embarrass or split the Allied coalition, others remark that the offer coincided with attempts by Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, to establish contact with the Western Allies and find a negotiated solution to Germany's worsening strategic situation. Although the Brand deal, also known as the blood-for-goods offer, was rejected by the Allies, Kasztner managed to keep the negotiations alive and is credited with having saved almost 1,700 Jews who were first routed to Bergen-Belsen, and then reached Switzerland.

The postwar Kasztner controversy is due to the fact that the group's rescue activity coincided with the clockwork deportation of almost half a million others straight to Auschwitz. It is underpinned by the notion that there is nothing like a free lunch. Among others, Kasztner was accused of having monopolised the rescue agenda in Hungary with his negotiated rescues and having blocked the road to more constructive alternatives.

Rudolf Kasztner at his trial in Israel. (Courtesy)

The heaviest charge was that Kasztner enjoyed an information advantage, but had not warned Hungarian Jewry about the impending danger. His failure to urge the 16,000 Jews of his home city Kolozsvar, to flee to Romania, was seen as a particularly grave dereliction of duty. In the 1950s he lost a libel trial in Israel, against a man who had accused him of outright collaboration. The damning verdict contended that Kasztner had made a Faustian bargain: his silence in return for those lives Eichmann had been willing to spare. Kasztner no longer witnessed the 1958 revision of this verdict by the Israeli Supreme Court, as he had been aÿssassinated by extremists one year earlier.

What made the Hungarian Holocaust so distinctive?

There is a reason why the final chapter of the Holocaust has a very peculiar flavor, and is so prone to controversy: in early 1944, while everywhere else

European Jewry is nearing extinction, Hungary still boasts a large community of almost 900,000 souls (including baptized Jews); a community that had every reason to expect that it would survive the war more or less intact. In the first of a string of brutal reversals of fortune that take place that year, over half of Hungarian Jewry is deported to Auschwitz, in record time. The Hungarian *Aktion* is supervised by no lesser than the logistics manager of the Final Solution himself, Adolf Eichmann. Departing from his usual modus operandi, which was to dispatch deportation specialists across Europe and travel on assignments from his lair in Berlin, this was the first and only time he set up base camp outside the Reich capital during the war. Lasting a mere eight weeks, Hungary was the shortest and the most efficient of all the Nazi extermination campaigns; and Hungarians account for the largest contingent of Auschwitz victims. Such were the numbers arriving that at one point the crematoria were no longer able to cope and the SS turned to burning bodies in pits.

Hungarian Jews arriving at Auschwitz. (Courtesy)

The March reversal of fortune was followed by two others, in July and in October, which respectively restored and withdrew hope again for those who had survived the first wave of deportations. Seeing as Germany was losing the war, Eichmann's 'masterpiece' has often been interpreted as an irrational 'eleventh hour' effort. How a small number of Nazis could pull this off, at a

time when the reality of mass extermination had already leaked, is the elephant in the room of Hungarian Holocaust Studies. Despite this fact most victims were unaware about their fate, which brings one to the uncomfortable question of how much they really knew, whether they could have been saved if they had received a warning, or whether they dismissed warnings as unfounded and perverse rumours. Two factors are commonly cited to explain how the victims could be lulled so easily: the trust that Hungarian Jews had in established Hungarian and Hungarian-Jewish leaders, who betrayed them or issued no warnings; and the fact that the victims were massively disinformed. While the first aspect has been studied in some detail, the disinformation campaign of 1944 has never been researched in any detail. Equally strange is the fact that many Germans are accepting financial and other inducements by Jews attempting to save their lives and the apparent mellowing of some (but not all) German attitudes.

This context introduces multiple bias into the sources, all of which have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Many critical issues that occurred during the Holocaust in Hungary are therefore not completely understood; a situation that prompted two prominent Holocaust historians, Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly to write in 2002 that certain episodes are probably no longer even re-constructible. Considering the problematic nature of the sources and the high moral stakes involved in getting things right, the historian needs to tread particularly carefully.

Kasztner's crime

Over the past six decades Kasztner has elicited the interest of academic and non-academic writers alike, among them Ben Hecht, Randolph Braham, Dov Dinur, Yehuda Bauer, Shlomo Aronson, Yechiam Weitz, Szita Szabolcs, Ladislaus Löb, and Anna Porter. British author Paul Bogdanor has now published a new book under the title Kasztner's Crime (Transactions, New Brunswick, London, 2016). This challenges a slowly emerging consensus that Kasztner acted in good faith after all, thereby throwing the debate back to square one. He makes the argument that the initial verdict, much-criticized for its severity at the time, was actually not harsh enough: Kasztner not

merely trespassed by not sharing his knowledge of extermination with the victims, but was an active accessory in the deception that facilitated deportation and mass murder. This, according to Bogdanor, was Kasztner's crime.

Bogdanor's line of attack comes two-fold: when the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944, the Soviets had just launched a surprise offensive which was thrusting towards the Hungarian border. Some historians have therefore argued that time was of the essence. Misleading the victims was critically important then. In this respect, the deportation specialists came with valuable experience, gained from rounding up and expediting populations across occupied Europe. Bogdanor therefore presents the various German 'deals' offered to Jewish leaders as a superbly synchronized and perfectly orchestrated ruse. This, by the way, entails slamming the work of a large number of reputable historians who have attested to the reality of Nazi feelers with the West and who consider the offers to exchange Jews for goods more or less genuine. According to Bogdanor, the specific role of Kasztner and his associates was to spread disinformation suggesting that deportees would be resettled inside Hungary; in some cases urging them to hurry boarding the trains in order to secure the best places. In other instances they are alleged to have dangled the carrot of limited German exemptions in front of community leaders, to induce them into speeding up the extermination of the remainder of their flocks.

The second charge is that Kasztner personally disinformed his political contacts in the free world about the pace at which the Final Solution in Hungary was proceeding, thereby spreading confusion and scuttling possible rescue initiatives.

The data problem

Bogdanor's thesis is as seductively simple as it is flawed, for the evidence laid out by him does not allow for the kind of definitive argument he seeks to make. As someone who has returned to the case repeatedly for a number of years, involving absorbing all the relevant published material and doing

archival work, I know how problematic the source situation is. The unreliability of the available data is due, principally, to the fact that the Hungarian Holocaust took place in what can only be described as a quagmire of disinformation. Not only was there a German-Hungarian embargo on information, followed by ample anti-Semitic propaganda and disinformation, but, contrary to what is sometimes suggested, even the BBC did not reliably inform the victims that they were headed for the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the postwar era the elaborate tales spun by German perpetrators who were asked to account for their crimes added a supplementary layer of disinformation. Only to be capped by the disinformation of both sides during and since the 1950s Israeli libel trial. The trial itself, and its aftermath, rattled the bedrock of Israeli state and society, and it is hard to imagine this challenge having gone without some kind of informational response on the part of the government. All this is without counting in that other potential bias-introducing factor, the reality of which Bogdanor discounts — Germans double-crossing not merely Jews and Hungarians, but also other Germans.

One of the claims made by Bogdanor is that survivor testimony attesting to Kasztner's disinformation has been ignored by historians, and that this proves his contention that Kasztner was a collaborator. Although survivor testimony has become an important source in Holocaust Studies, the temptation to draw straightforward conclusions from this, and without appropriate methodology, should be resisted. First of all, none of the testimonies cited by Bogdanor to incriminate Kasztner provide first-hand accounts of the latter's purported disinformation. What they do mention are community leaders and others known to Kasztner in one way or another, but Bogdanor's charge is by-and-large a charge of guilt by association, based on circumstantial evidence.

Secondly, the quality of testimony is heavily dependent on the conditions under which this is obtained. Nothing that relies on human recollection can be treated as a 'database' from which to extract 'information', a fact that is backed up by ample psychological research. After a string of revelations in recent years about false police confessions that land innocent people in jail,

a phenomenon also known as 'false memory', it is now more than clear that interviewer's or interrogator's bias can rub off, leading to a situation where the latter inadvertently prompts the answers he or she wanted to hear from the beginning.

We have no idea about the conditions under which the testimony cited by Bogdanor came into existence. What we can fathom, however, is that the trauma, emotion and politicization that attaches to the Kasztner affair is probably not the right context for obtaining one hundred percent accurate testimony.

The importance of source criticism

Further limitations also show up in Bogdanor's failure to engage in source criticism. None of the available sources, whether contemporaneous or recent, written or oral, have the solidity that Bogdanor claims them to have. Constructing a narrative without a critical basis is like attempting to reconstruct what happened to the Titanic by looking at the debris floating on the surf of the ocean. The sources need to be interpreted, scrutinized, placed in context, and discarded when their reliability is doubtful, in order to eliminate bias.

This is important as regards Bogdanor's second charge, Kasztner misleading his contacts in the free world about the fate of the deportees. The charge itself relies in a large measure on the exploitation of Va'ada correspondence with key rescue and relief work personnel in the free world in June 1944. This, Bogdanor claims, emanates directly from Kasztner and was written to disinform. However, if we take one of these letters, dated 13 June 1944 (today in the Haganah Archives in Tel Aviv), we find that it does not feature a signature. The recipient himself had doubts whether this letter had been written by Kasztner, annotating it '(?) Kastner', in blue pencil. Curiously, for a letter supposedly written by Kasztner, it also contains the phrase: 'my suggestion is […] that a sum of 600,000 dollars per month should be made available to a committee headed by Mr Philip von Freudiger. This committee should also include the following: Dr Rezsoe Kasztner (my highlighting),

Julius Link, Joel Brand and Josef Blum.' Apart from this, the letter is also internally inconsistent. It states that 400,000 Hungarian Jews have been deported; that 'some of those able to work' have been sent to a labour camp called Waldsee; that they have written 750,000 postcards; and that the fate of those unable to work is 'unpleasant'.

The mention of the Waldsee decoy in an official communication ('Waldsee' was a fictitious camp, set up to mislead Jewish leaders) is, of course, troubling, especially as Kasztner is unlikely to have been fooled by this. However, there are some giveaways, such as the ludicrously high number of 750,000 postcards, written by only 'some of' the deportees selected for work. On the other hand there is no outright disinformation, as it is made rather clear that the non-workers have been killed ('unpleasant fate'). All that is clear in this letter is its purpose: to ask for funds for rescue operations. Otherwise its authorship or the question why it was written in this way is anyone's guess (we know from other sources that Kasztner kept his cards close to his chest and did not share information; writing this letter could have been delegated to a minor operative who had not been briefed on all aspects of the situation).

A confusion of roles: grand inquisitor or historian?

Mr Bogdanor's general stance is that of the investigative journalist, criminal investigator or courtroom prosecutor but not of the historical researcher: His use of a critical apparatus (footnotes, citations, quotation marks and bibliography) is an effective tactic in persuading the non-specialist reader that this is a piece of scholarship. But it cannot fool the trained eye of the historian. The limitations show in the research design: a hypothesis is suggested and then the data is slotted into 'all the right places'. While it may look scientific it is in fact self-referential, producing a circular argument that confirms what was already 'known' to begin with.

Contrast this with the historian who lays out all the data (and the stress here is on all), including data which may challenge the working hypothesis, and then lets the data tell its own story, without selective bias. This is called the

rule of falsifiability. A reliable way of establishing the seriousness of an argument therefore is to check whether it omits any salient facts. Bogdanor's key omission is his inadequate contextualisation of several transports of at least 15,000 Jews from the Hungarian provinces to Strasshof, a labour camp outside Vienna. Gerlach and Aly consider this operation to be the most significant achievement of the Kasztner group, even more significant than the Bergen-Belsen train. This exception to the rule (all other Hungarian transports were routed to Auschwitz) was owed to a request for forced workers, forwarded to the SS by the Vienna city council. However, when Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the chief of the Reich Main Security Office, informed the mayor of Vienna, in late June, that he would receive his workers, the latter must have been in for a surprise, for the transports would comprise entire families, of which only one-third could be sent to work. The genuineness of the document in question cannot be doubted, as it was used in the Nuremberg trials. This raises the legitimate question as to who could have planted such an idea on the Nazis, who were not in the habit of dispatching labourers together with their families to camps where they might survive the war together. Although the documentation is once more elusive, it is only fair to cast a sideways glance at who exactly had been working on a general dynamic where a demand for workers could result in transports consisting by two-thirds of non-workers. The answer is not difficult to find. It most probably had something to do with the only individuals in Budapest capable of facing up directly to Eichmann, Rezső Kasztner and Hansi Brand.

Bogdanor's lack of critical approach is not helped by a style of argument that is polemical. He routinely throws out a barrage of facts and quotes, and then ends with an apodictic statement, always to the disadvantage of Kasztner, which does not necessarily follow from its antecedents. Other limitations come to fore in the one-sidedness of a simplistic moral judgment on what Bogdanor alleges to be Kasztner's motivation. Ultimately he reduces Kasztner's complex and tragic figure to a vulgar concept of vanity and bad faith. In fact, the very title of the book treats its topic as a foregone conclusion.

The importance of narrative framing

Kasztner can be portrayed in a particularly negative light depending on how one chooses to frame the issue. The assumption that the Germans were on their last legs in spring 1944, and that their action was driven by a realization that they were running out of time, is as questionable as the idea that they had arrived with a master plan for the destruction of the Hungarian Jews. The reality is that after having liberated Ukraine up to the Dniester in spring 1944, the Soviets shifted their emphasis to the North, in preparation of the summer offensive (operation Bagration), and the front stabilized in the Southern sector for several months. In addition, the Western Allies had not yet landed in Normandy, and their amphibious operation had a 50-50 chance of failing or succeeding. The implication of this is that the idea, according to which some Germans may have sought a way of negotiating themselves out of their strategic predicament, and were willing to make a certain number of limited concessions, is not as outlandish as it may appear at first sight.

There is also good reason to believe that the extent and speed with which the situation deteriorated for the Hungarian Jews surprised even the Germans. As Dieter Wisliceny testified in 1947, Eichmann had not expected the Hungarian deportations to take place before July 1944 and was baffled by the zeal of the Hungarian authorities. Eichmann had, in fact, assumed the usual complications that arose whenever he had had to deal with sovereign governments in the past, such as in Bulgaria, France, Denmark, and Romania. Therefore, a German intent to deport the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz for extermination and slave labour is not attestable before April 23. At which speed the deportation would take place is only finalised by the perpetrators on May 4-5, and this, at first, only concerned the territories acquired by Hungary during the war. As to Trianon Hungary in its 1920 borders, its Jews were still afforded a short breathing space; their ultimate fate is not decided before a period stretching from May 25 to June 1. This brings us to another incontestable fact that has no place in Bogdanor's interpretation (which focuses on the mono-causal explanation of Jewish betrayal): Hungarian collaboration, arguably the key for a correct

understanding of the infernal speed of the Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust.

In conclusion, it is far from certain whether Bogdanor's 'indictment' can be heralded as the definitive Kasztner book. It is precisely because of its wider claim — having solved one of the core mysteries of the Final Solution in Hungary, in one single masterly stroke — that it pays to remain skeptical. The debate on Kasztner is far from closed. While it would be pointless to deny that Kasztner's actions were borderline, Bogdanor does little to illuminate this. We must therefore place our trust in further and more profound historiographical work.

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