The Arrow Cross did not bother with women. Women were not partners for them. During the interrogations, I did not meet a single Arrow Cross woman. And you are saying this only now (that 10 percent of Arrow Cross party members were women)? Why didn’t you tell me this thirty-five years ago, when I could have overheard down on them?"

This was the answer I received from a former officer of the State Protection Authority, Hungary’s secret service (Ministerstvo Egyesült Helyzetekről (MEH), hereafter MEH), who asked me, during a 2007 interview, about Arrow Cross women. From 1937 to 1973, this man had investigated domestic reactionary forces (that is, war criminals and Arrow Cross members). This quote illustrates the dilemma that researchers face when they inquire into phenomena, the very existence of which many deny. At the Central European University, quantitative researchers have been working on documents stemming from the Budapest People’s Tribunal — documents that have been preserved in the Budapest City Archives. This research reveals the first systematic inquiry into the operation of the People’s Tribunals. In light of the initial findings, we may reassess the views that experts and the broader public have held on transitional justice and draw attention to previously neglected gender aspects of right-wing radicalism.

The DEBATE ON THE PEOPLE’S TRIBUNALS

In recent years, the analysis of World War II history has once again taken political center stage in the former Eastern Bloc countries. In Hungary, the debate about the prosecution of Holocaust denial was resumed, partly in response to the advance of far-right political organizations whose internal group cohesion is confirmed through Holocaust denial. In Hungary, the debate over who was responsible for the losses in World War II and for the liquidation of 600,000 Hungarian Jews — or rather, the absence of such a debate — has caused a split in the national narrative. After World War II, at the very outset of the democratic transition, the Hungarian People’s Tribunals were to draw a distinction among various elements of the nation’s collective memory. In the initial findings, we may reassess the views that experts and the broader public have held on transitional justice and draw attention to previously neglected gender aspects of right-wing radicalism.

The COURTS

What are the attractions of this new form of analysis? In Hungary the question is partly a political one. In the 1990s, first and foremost, the opportunity simply to search out women and make them visible within the institutional frameworks that produced the documentation which is now available. In other words, historians can do research on the documentation that institutions produced in the course of their work.

Such institutions include the People’s Tribunals, in which lawyers, judges, and public prosecutors were active. But this traditional, historical, descriptive approach is apparently far from simple, even as far as the courts are concerned, for the obvious reason that the legal profession was a male profession. Moreover, when it comes to their experience of the country’s political history, Hungary’s lawyers are divided along gender lines. Half the lawyers before the middle of 1945, law was not only a respectability for the middle classes; it also offered upward mobility in society. There was only one woman in the entire business, and the middle classes, and female law students could apply for admission to law school. The women who were accepted were allowed to complete their studies, though various special permits were required. It is interesting to follow the careers of the women lawyers who, complying with the gender-based traditions of the legal profession, dealt with social matters or worked as people’s public prosecutors (since they were, as women, considered innocent). The first wave of women who left law school graduated in 1941. Those who did not practice law as professionals were mainly women who had entered the legal profession because of the expansion of “Communist law” and a devaluation of the role of law. Women were encouraged to study law because they were seen as reliable. They began to graduate from the university and become important positions in the newly formed state apparatus.

The expansion of the People’s Tribunals in the aftermath of World War II

ARROW CROSS WOMEN ACTIVISTS

According to membership records, estimated 15,000 women were members of the Arrow Cross Party in Hungary. After the war, these women were interned or imprisoned because they had supported the occupying German forces, or been collaborators. German and Austrian historians are alone in having studied women who were active in right-wing political parties. A pertinent question is: why did these women join a radical and marginal party with an obviously anti-woman program, a party that wished to keep women in the home?4

My research, which is carried out in cooperation with Heddi Balko (ELTE, Budapest), has shown that in Budapest, women accounted for 10 percent of those indicted for war crimes.5 This percentage corresponds roughly to today’s female-to-male ratio in Hungarian public life, that is, Hungary’s political parties and parliaments. The 1945 Act on People’s Tribunals was introduced in order to regulate the function of courts (as promoters of the Communist takeover) for which lawyers, judges, and public prosecutors were active. But this traditional, historical, descriptive approach is far from simple, even as far as the courts are concerned, for the obvious reason that the legal profession was a male profession. Moreover, when it comes to their experience of the country’s political history, Hungary’s lawyers are divided along gender lines. Half the lawyers before the middle of 1945, law was not only a respectability for the middle classes; it also offered upward mobility in society. There was only one woman in the entire business, and the middle classes, and female law students could apply for admission to law school. The women who were accepted were allowed to complete their studies, though various special permits were required. It is interesting to follow the careers of the women lawyers who, complying with the gender-based traditions of the legal profession, dealt with social matters or worked as people’s public prosecutors (since they were, as women, considered innocent). The first wave of women who left law school graduated in 1941. Those who did not practice law as professionals were mainly women who had entered the legal profession because of the expansion of “Communist law” and a devaluation of the role of law. Women were encouraged to study law because they were seen as reliable. They began to graduate from the university and become important positions in the newly formed state apparatus.

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The Arrow Cross women was no Amazon. Nor was she a victim.

established a separate political party for women. The Arrow Cross followed his example. The new party was composed of many smaller, divided and marginalized groups and parties. Thanks to the personal abilities and ambitions of Ferenc Lázár, the party was established in one party in September 1940. The Arrow Cross Party’s organization mirrored the structure of the Hungarian women’s section; it was to be found on organizational levels in the middle, on the local and on the national level.

The women’s section was evidently ascribed to support the mass of membership; the Arrow Cross leadership seemed to have recognized the political usefulness of its women members. Several different kinds of membership were open to women: full membership, supporting membership and even secret membership.

The goal was to further women’s political engagement. Male Arrow Cross party leaders joined the leaders of other political parties in seeking to limit the female membership of the party; however, it was not easy to do so. In fact, there were many different kinds of women who joined the party. In 1944, when Arrow Cross organizer Gyula Pauer’s name was approved, it was to be argued that the Arrow Cross Party, as the utmost extension of the Arrow Cross movement, could not be regarded as a political party of equals of men, they were immediately expelled from the party headquarters. There was no room for women in the inner circles of the party leadership or in the decision-making process. Even so, official Arrow Cross Party documents defined “women” as strong and active.

The Arrow Cross movement faced significant opposition; its members were imprisoned and executed not only by the country’s conservative elite, but also by the Gendarmes as well. It is difficult to find a group of women who have fought for the freedom of their country more intensely. Members of the Arrow Cross Party were participants in the People’s Tribunals. These women were substantially the same as the others. If, as Roland Barthes claims, a text is how one reads, a gender-based text is “how” one reads. The definition of autobiographical memory anticipated mode of remembering, received relatively low prioritization. For women, it was essential to obtain and exercise the opportunity to rob and murder while there was a chance to do so. The “master narrative” of the Arrow Cross became the instrument of political leaders. Ethnic cleansing is also associated with crimes against property, as it provides opportunities for loot.

In accordance with the historical canon, the “more famous” of the female war criminals and Arrow Cross women, such as Liszt Lucie, wife of Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Liszt, as well as the famous actress Éva Káldi, feature in the historical accounts as members of the mass murder on Marcus street. This supports the fullness belief that all the female members of Arrow Cross were middle-class and thus provided the opportunity to rob and murder while there was a chance to do so. The “master narrative” of the Arrow Cross became the instrument of political leaders. Ethnic cleansing is also associated with crimes against property, as it provides opportunities for loot.

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text is a security system for the ego, then creating a life story provides the narrator with illusory or imaginary control not only over the narrative but also over life itself. This is the control that the women who stood accused at the People’s Tribunals believed that they possessed. The defendants thus tried to construct a coherent self-representation, mindful of the fact that a single error would lead to their imprisonment for years. In the courtroom, the ability to give a perfect performance became a matter of life or death.

THE HISTORY OF NON-ACKNOWLEDGED ACTORS IN SOCIETY

A gender-sensitive analysis of political and social discourse is made particularly difficult by the fact that the identity-shaping power of the discourses establishes homogenous and exclusive units. In times of war, women are portrayed as loyal mothers and citizens who send their sons to war — or as the reverse, collaborators who are a threat to the soldiers’ morals. The question is: where do we find subjectivity in these personal narratives? As far as sources related to criminal cases are concerned, we face particular difficulties, for if we regard them as “legends” — to use Paul Thompson’s expression — then they are of a fixed structure and conform to the socially accepted system. The court creates a linear, single-threaded, exclusive narrative regime, and the accused has to find his or her place within this regime. In this situation, female defendants were faced with dual discrimination.

Feminist researchers are sensitive to the development of various power hierarchies and appreciate the consequences of such hierarchies. Concerning the court trial records, power relations among the various actors differ significantly — not merely as a result of the hierarchy and politics of the legal system itself, but also because of differences between defendants and plaintiffs in terms of social status and gender and the degree of their embeddedness in various social networks. The more embedded a defendant was (with corresponding access to information and assistance), the easier she found it to manipulate the court, and thus, often, secure an acquittal.

The story is shaped by the defendant’s confession or testimony and is based on her responses to questions. At the People’s Tribunals, the questions were posed by men, for women were not employed as lawyers, judges or public prosecutors. All the court officials were men; not until 1945 were women allowed to pursue a legal career. The court’s gender policy is obvious, judging from the data. Women defendants who portrayed themselves as weak and powerless victims who had submissively complied with the suggestions and initiatives of men received lighter sentences. The stories of the female accused are “silent”, because these women managed, while in the courtroom, to exploit “legends”, thus avoiding a search for individual expressions, meanings, and thoughts. The end result was that they were not required to express themselves as individuals. The diversity of the legends, and the many different ways in which they could be used, provided many of the women with a means to obtain lighter sentencing. On the other hand, stories of an individual nature did not accord with the court’s cognitive sample. Accordingly, politically active women received harsher sentences. A gender-based analysis may, thus, contribute to a better understanding of the complex legacy of the People’s Tribunals and the effect of this legacy on contemporary Hungarian society. It may help us understand why a former officer and interrogator of the State Protection Authority cannot recall a single Arrow Cross woman.

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4. In Budapest there was only one practising female lawyer: Dr. Margit Ungár. Dr. Erzsébet Koncz became a lawyer in Budapest in 1935, but she then worked in Keckeméret, for the Social Department of the municipality. She proved to be an excellent candidate when, in 1945, she became a people’s public prosecutor. MON XIX-E-1-l Ta 1231. 8. In 1928, Dr. Margit Ungár became a member of the Budapest Chamber; she is regarded as Budapest’s first female lawyer. Lili Gáspár became a lawyer in Budapest in 1931. I thank Anna Katkó for her assistance with these facts.
7. We digitalized that part of the Budapest People’s Tribunal’s records that was kept in the Budapest Municipal Archives in the form of a questionnaire. We analyzed it using SPSS. At the time of writing, data relating to the crimes of those convicted are still missing from the analyzed database. This is understandable in view of the fact that in order to find individual convictions, sentencing and the actual time spent in prison for more than 70,000 defendants (10 percent of whom were women), we would have to examine every single file.
15. Ibid., p. 193.
16. For the year 1941, we have data showing the distribution of wage-earning women according to occupational fields.
17. My thanks to Kláráje Schrijvers for the information.