

Notes on a Volume about János Esterházy

Michal Schvarc: *János Esterházy a jeho miesto v moderných slovenských dejinách* [János Esterházy and his place in modern Slovak history]. Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky, Bratislava, 2023, 191 p. ISBN 9788088726845.¹

János Esterházy remains a figure of exceptional importance in 20th-century Slovak and Hungarian history, and new publications about him usually spark heated reactions. Michal Schvarc's recent bilingual volume (in Slovak and English), however, has attracted little attention outside a narrow circle of specialists. This muted reception is not necessarily a disadvantage: the noisy media storms that so often surround Esterházy in both Hungarian and Slovak public life rarely encourage thoughtful scholarly debate. It may also reflect Schvarc's conscious choice not to present Esterházy as a hero, a traitor, or a spy. His balanced and measured account, precisely because it avoids extremes, fails to meet the sensation-driven expectations of today's public discourse.

The news of a new volume on Esterházy was at first encouraging, since a thorough Slovak assessment of this Hungarian politician has long been awaited. Unfortunately, that wait is not yet over, as the 191-page hardback is not a political biography. The author's historical contribution amounts to only about 30 pages (60 in the bilingual edition), followed by a much longer selection of documents. Adding to the problem, the book was not published by an academic institution but by the Slovak Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs—a detail that in this region is rarely a good sign. Government bodies seldom support the publication of scholarly works, and when they do, their motives are usually quite evident. In this case, the intention seems clear enough: to counter Hungarian political and historiographical initiatives on Esterházy and to challenge the rather one-sided image of him that they often promote.

1 A closely related article of the Author was published in Slovak language in *Historický časopis*, 72, 4, 2024, 841-848.

The author was thus in a somewhat difficult position: his primary field of research is the history of Germans in Slovakia, and he has rarely engaged with the history of the Hungarian minority. As a result, the book's main text is not based on his own original research. Instead, Schvarc draws on earlier studies and the documents included in the volume to take a stance on the contested questions surrounding Esterházy's life. Whether he succeeds is something this review attempts to assess. What can be said at the outset, however, is that even if I do not agree with him on every point, this is unquestionably a serious and honest work of scholarship and one that may well make an important contribution to the ongoing historical debates about Esterházy.

Although the archival documents appear at the end of the volume, they are perhaps the best place to begin, as they represent the book's greatest value. The 25 sources, published in the original Slovak, German, and English, were until now either unavailable or very difficult for readers to access. Slovak readers in particular have lacked the opportunity to form their own judgments on the subject based on contemporary documents. This makes the publication of these sources especially important: they broaden the interpretive framework of the historian's text and introduce a kind of multi-perspectivity into the volume. In effect, they allow readers to reconsider the author's arguments and, if they wish, to interpret the main text differently. From this perspective, Documents 1 and 2, which are Esterházy's two interrogation records from 1945 and 1949, respectively, are especially valuable. They are among the very few sources in which Esterházy speaks in his own voice.

The authorial text of the volume reads like a polemical essay. From the outset, Schvarc makes clear that he does not aim to provide a comprehensive treatment of the subject but instead to focus on a few key issues at the heart of debates about Esterházy. He therefore concentrates on three main themes: Esterházy's role in the territorial disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1938-39; his activities during the Second World War, with particular attention to his stance on the Jewish question; and finally, the trial brought against him before the National Court.

In essence, the central claim of the relatively brief authorial text is that Hungarian historiography's portrayal of Esterházy is biased and often unscientific, while doubts about the fairness of his trial are unfounded. Stated this bluntly, this argument sounds categorical; in practice, however, the text is more balanced and nuanced. By "Hungarian authors," Schvarc primarily has in mind Imre Molnár, the scholar who initiated research on Esterházy, has published several books on him, and is now actively involved in promoting his beatification. According to Schvarc, Molnár's biography *Esterházy János élete és mártírhálála* (The Life and Martyrdom of János Esterházy, Budapest: Méry Ratio, 2010), which is already available in several languages including Slovak, is marked by the arbitrary use of sources and, at times, even by fabrication. For this reason, he considers it closer to hagiography than to scholarly biography.

This criticism carries significant weight, since Hungarian memory politics (and its followers in Slovakia) have fully embraced Molnár's image of Esterházy, placing it at the center of the Hungarian master narrative. In this sense, Schvarc's critique of Molnár amounts to a sweeping judgment on Hungarian memory politics itself, which has turned Esterházy into a rigid symbol, effectively shutting down any genuine scholarly debate about him. At the same time, those who try to offer a more nuanced view of Esterházy are often branded as traitors to the Hungarian cause or as agents of foreign interests.

Yet this cannot be blamed on Molnár alone. He has devoted much of his life to studying Esterházy's legacy and to ensuring that the image he has drawn is known and accepted by a wider public. He is not simply one researcher among many: he is *the* Esterházy scholar, bound to his subject by a strong emotional attachment and firmly convinced of Esterházy's political and personal greatness. Such passion, while admirable, does not necessarily strengthen the scholarly rigor of his work. Historiography is, at its core, a discursive enterprise, requiring the tools of critical inquiry and a willingness to doubt. The process of beatification, by contrast, demands above all faith and commitment—qualities that sit uneasily alongside doubt.

Even so, Molnár's work possesses undeniable value. His efforts to uncover sources and present Esterházy to a wider public cannot be dismissed. His conclusions may at times be exaggerated or biased (as Schvarc argues), and his use of sources (including what he chooses to omit) can and should be criticized. Yet the knowledge he has assembled cannot simply be discarded wholesale. It is not enough to dismiss Molnár as unreliable; rather, each of his claims must be weighed individually and agreed with, debated, or refuted.

The first major period of Esterházy's political career was the 1930s, when, as "Budapest's protégé," he was chosen to lead the National Christian Socialist Party (Országos Keresztényszocialista Párt; OKP) and, from 1936, became co-chairman of the United Hungarian Party (Egyesült Magyar Párt; EMP). Schvarc rightly observes that one of the key drivers of Esterházy's conduct during this period was Czechoslovakia's nationality policy, which ignored the needs of the Hungarian community and, thus, inflicted many grievances. The author is also correct in noting that this shortsighted nationality policy contributed to the sharp opposition stance of Hungarian politics in Slovakia and, in the long run, pushed the Hungarian population into Budapest's arms.

The author also rightly notes that Esterházy, acting in line with and in close cooperation with Budapest's policies, primarily sought the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, which could have been the first step toward revising the Treaty of Trianon borders. This inevitably raises the question, often posed in Slovak historiography, of whether Esterházy was in fact an agent of Budapest. Schvarc is more cautious on this point, and rightly so, since Esterházy's close ties with Budapest (like those of other Hungarian politicians in Slovakia) were by no means secret or conspiratorial. The Czechoslovak

authorities, whose network of informants also extended into the Hungarian parties and who were well informed about all developments in Slovak Hungarian political life, were fully aware of these connections and tacitly accepted that Hungarian politicians in Slovakia, including Esterházy, consulted Budapest on every major step and reported back on the course of local politics.

While highlighting Esterházy's ties with Budapest and his efforts toward border revision, Schvarc also notes that, unlike his co-chair Andor Jaross, Esterházy sought to keep more distance from Nazi Germany and the Sudeten German Party. Even in the turbulent weeks of 1938, he kept the EMP and the Hungarian population on constitutional and parliamentary ground.

Through his family background, Esterházy may have been more conscious than many other Slovak Hungarian politicians of the importance of coexistence with the Slovaks. Yet he did not treat them as equal partners. For Esterházy, winning over the Slovaks primarily served the goal of advancing the restoration of the millennial state of Saint Stephen. Unlike many of his contemporaries, and especially the leaders of Budapest's politics, he was probably not captive to the false illusion that Slovak society longed to return to the framework of the Hungarian state. He may well have been influenced by his more enlightened sister, Lujza Esterházy, who argued that unless Hungarians finally acknowledged their wrongs against the Slovaks and introduced social and economic reforms that would make Hungary attractive, any expectation of the Slovaks' return was nothing but an illusion.

Regarding Esterházy's role during the Slovak state led by Jozef Tiso, Schvarc focuses on two aspects: first, the Hungarian politician's relationship to the regime and Nazi ideology and, second, his position on the Jewish question. It is perhaps unsurprising that in both matters he disputes Hungarian historiography. Hungarian authors emphasize Esterházy's strong Christian convictions and thus his opposition to Nazism, portraying him as an opponent of the Tiso regime. Schvarc argues that while Esterházy's Christian Social orientation did indeed place him in ideological conflict with Nazism, it did not make him an active opponent of the Nazi system. He applies the same reasoning to Esterházy's conflict with Franz Karmasin, which, in Schvarc's view, stemmed not from anti-Nazi convictions but from personal animosity between the two politicians and the rivalry between the Hungarian parties and the Carpathian German Party (Kárpáti Német Párt) for the votes of Slovakia's German population.

The author is undoubtedly correct in noting that, as a member of the Slovak parliament, Esterházy also played a part in the establishment of an authoritarian regime marked by totalitarian traits. His parliamentary position, however, was a peculiar one: he entered the legislature on the Hlinka party's list (there was no other way), yet as the sole Hungarian member he often assumed a kind of opposition role. Moreover, since he had no influence over either the ruling party or government policy, his responsibility was of a different order than that of ministers or members of the ruling party.

Since few ego-documents survive, it is difficult to form a balanced judgment of Esterházy (though that does not prevent many from making highly categorical claims). However, one point is clear: he was neither a Nazi nor a fascist (as some have labeled him), nor did he sympathize with such ideologies, something he repeatedly declared openly. Moreover, this view is not only based on what we know today: many of his contemporaries, including those on the opposite end of the political spectrum—such as the left-wing Rezső Szalatnai or the communist Zoltán Fábry—thought the same. They had no reason to defend him, yet they did, almost certainly because they understood that Esterházy's stance played a role in keeping both the EMP and the vast majority of the Hungarian population from rallying behind the ideas of National Socialism or the system modeled on it by Jozef Tiso. Esterházy's position was no secret to either the Germans or to the Arrow Cross regime led by Szálasi, which seized power in Hungary with German assistance on October 15, 1944. It is no coincidence that, immediately after taking power, the Arrow Cross sought to sideline Esterházy and replace him with a more pliant figure. In the end, however, they failed.

With that said, his rejection of Nazi ideology and his deep religiosity did not prevent Esterházy from agreeing with some of Nazi Germany's goals and maintaining active contact with Reich officials. This pragmatic stance was, to a degree, part of his duty as leader of the Hungarian community, but this too deserves further research

As for Esterházy's position on the Jews, Schvarc's conclusions are partly convincing, since antisemitism was not alien to Esterházy, and his statements suggest he approved restricting the alleged or real Jewish social and economic influence by *numerus clausus*. This, one could add, carried a different connotation in that period, before Auschwitz. By contrast, the racial segregation, deportation, and annihilation of the Jews stood in sharp opposition to his ethics derived from Christianity. Moreover, as the responsible leader of the Hungarian community in Slovakia (something that must always be taken into account in his case), he was reluctant to support measures that entailed the severe discrimination of any minority.

Fortunately, on this issue we have an authentic source from Esterházy himself, as he expressed his opinion during the vote in the Slovak parliament on May 15, 1942. Although every political statement must be treated with caution, there is no reason to doubt his words:

The bill on the deportation of the Jews is of such a nature that I cannot in any way make it my own, and I cannot vote for it. From my earliest youth I have always been of an anti-Jewish disposition and will remain so; however, this does not mean that with my vote I will support a law that tramples upon every divine and human right. In the deportation of the Jews, the Slovaks are not deporting them as a denomination, but as a race, and this is yet another reason for me to vote against the bill. The Hungarians in Slovakia constitute a national minority, and therefore it is absolutely impossible for us to accept and make our own a bill that grants the majority the right to deport a minority...

In the matter of Esterházy and the Jewish question, perhaps strangely, the most revealing evidence lies in what he did *not* say and did *not* write. At a time when mocking Jews was a widespread trend in Slovakia, and Slovak newspapers routinely published anti-Semitic articles, Esterházy made no such statements. Moreover, the publications under his supervision refrained from the vulgar anti-Semitic tone common elsewhere. That restraint held considerable significance in that context, yet he remained silent even when Hungarian Jews, among them his former party companions and Hungarian Jews living in the annexed territories, were confined to ghettos under inhumane conditions and later deported to death camps. That silence is equally telling.

Perhaps the answer lies in the mix of Esterházy's pragmatism and the habits he brought from interwar politics. Between 1920 and 1938, Hungarian politics in Slovakia was clearly marked by a distance from antisemitism. This was true both of Esterházy's own party, the OKP, and to Andor Jaross's Hungarian National Party (Magyar Nemzeti Párt; MNP). The only difference was that the OKP had no Jewish members, while the MNP did. Still, it was understood in both parties that Jews themselves were a minority, and since most of them spoke Hungarian, they could serve as potential allies against Prague.

With much of the party elite transferred to Hungary, Jaross and his followers immediately joined the camp of antisemitic agitators. In 1944, Jaross became Minister of the Interior, responsible for the deportation of Hungary's Jews, and after the war his life was justly ended on the gallows. By contrast, the branch of the EMP that remained in Slovakia continued to keep its distance from antisemitic agitation. Undoubtedly, this was due in part to the personal qualities of Jaross and Esterházy but even more to political interests, for while Jaross and his circle no longer needed the Jews as allies, Esterházy and his circle still did.

Schvarc acknowledges that the Hungarian politician did in fact provide assistance to certain persecuted individuals and families. He questions, however, whether Esterházy played as significant a role in helping Jewish refugees in 1942, when many were fleeing from Slovakia to Hungary, as Imre Molnár and István Janek assert. To support his argument, Schvarc cites several sources that make no mention of Esterházy's involvement. Yet if we want a clear picture, the sources referenced by Molnár must also be examined in detail; this step cannot simply be omitted.

The last part of Schvarc's study addresses Esterházy's 1947 trial before the National Court in Bratislava. He disputes those who question procedural fairness and interpret his conviction as a judgment on the entire Hungarian minority. Schvarc insists that ethnicity was not decisive; one may debate the severity of the sentence, but to call the trial manipulated without evidence is misleading. The issue is not that Schvarc dismisses the views of Molnár and others but that he does so without systematically addressing the criticisms of the trial point by point. Instead, he relies on a familiar political argument: that reopening people's court verdicts would set a dangerous precedent.

Yet serious doubts have been raised about the objectivity of retributational justice, and one of the strongest arguments comes from Anton Rašla, the prosecutor in the Tiso trial. Reflecting on a specific case, he described the practice of the Slovak people's courts as follows:

In that revolutionary political process (as the courts were between 1945 and 1947), the issue was not really about you personally. It was about ensuring that no one could later accuse the new political leadership of failing to distance itself from the "fascist regime of the Slovak state." Our goal was to prevent familiar accusations, like those I myself heard during the trial ("you are all traitors"), from being directed at the entire nation. To avoid making the whole nation the target of vengeance, we had to "find the guilty," even if it meant picking names out of the phone book.

This was not unique to Slovakia; similar practices occurred in other countries. However, in Slovakia, ethnicity played a role alongside political considerations, and even Slovak scholarship admits that the people's courts often judged Hungarians or Germans more harshly than Slovaks.

In light of the above, I still consider it legitimate to raise questions about Esterházy's trial; indeed, this is one of the historian's fundamental tasks. There is no doubt that retributational justice was a legitimate and necessary element of the processes that brought the war to a close. It is also clear that, although the practice of people's courts at the time may offend our modern sense of legal fairness, that does not mean it was necessarily unlawful in its own day. The problem, then, is not that Esterházy was tried and convicted but rather the circumstances of the trial and the unusual severity of the sentence.

From the outset, Esterházy was at a disadvantage. At his trial on September 16, 1946, he could not be present in person (through no fault of his own) and was represented by a state-appointed lawyer. This, however, was neither unusual nor unlawful. What is more striking is that, despite the seriousness of the charges (and, as it turned out, of the sentence), the entire trial lasted only a single day. This is particularly noteworthy given that the best-known defendants, including Tiso, Mach, Ďurčanský, and Vojtech Tuka, faced people's court trials that were preceded by months of preparation, giving the defense sufficient time to prepare, of which they made full use. The joint trial of Tiso, Mach, and Ďurčanský lasted four months, while Tuka's trial ran for 17 days. By contrast, Esterházy's trial was concluded in just one.

Had this taken place immediately after the war, in the revolutionary atmosphere when swift death sentences by people's courts were common even in Western Europe, it would be easier to understand. However, in the autumn of 1947 there was no justification for such haste, especially when a human life was at stake. To make matters worse, Esterházy's appointed defense attorney received the indictment only five days before the trial and was not permitted to call defense witnesses, and the death sentence was delivered with striking speed.

The severity of the sentence itself may also raise doubts. Schvarc stresses that the Slovak National Council's Retribution Decree No. 33/1945, under which Esterházy was prosecuted, applied to all members of the Slovak parliament. Yet of the 82 individuals who had held a parliamentary mandate at some point between 1938 and 1945, around 40% were never brought to trial. Of those who were tried, nearly one-third were either acquitted or received only a verbal reprimand. Only a few were sentenced to long prison terms (over 10 years), such as Matej Hučka, who had played an active role in the deportation of Jews. A death sentence was handed down in just three cases involving individuals who, between March 14, 1939, and April 1945, had served as members of the Slovak parliament without holding an executive position: Josef Steinhübel, Sigmund Keil, and János Esterházy. Two of these were of German nationality and one Hungarian. Moreover, in none of their biographies does one find facts that would justify a death sentence. Meanwhile, not a single Slovak legislator received such a severe punishment, not even those who, unlike Esterházy and Steinhübel, had eagerly voted in favor of the law enabling the deportation of Jews. That may, of course, be a coincidence, but I would not bet on it.

According to Michal Malatinský, a scholar of the people's courts, the Slovak National Court in Bratislava handed down 17 death sentences. His list, however, omits Franz Karmasin, leader of the Deutsche Partei, and thus counting him brings the total to 18. The vast majority of these cases involved individuals who had committed war crimes in the conventional sense: the assault, killing, or deportation of civilians; the mistreatment of prisoners of war; or acts of wanton destruction. They were all punished with the ultimate penalty. Among those executed were the highest-ranking representatives of the Slovak state (President Jozef Tiso, Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka, and Foreign Minister Alexander Ďurčanský) who, by virtue of their positions, were held accountable for everything that occurred in Slovakia between 1939 and 1945. Also sentenced to death were figures directly responsible for the Holocaust and the physical violence inflicted on Jews (such as Anton Vašek and Otomar Kubala), as well as those who committed documented war crimes on the Soviet front or during the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising (SS General Hermann Höfle and Ladislav Kleinnert).

Esterházy did not fall into any of the above categories. He was convicted under Paragraph 2 of the Slovak National Council's Retribution Decree No. 33/1945 as a "domestic traitor," specifically under point (a): undermining Czechoslovakia and the democratic order and point (d): promoting the activities of fascist occupiers and domestic traitors and verbally defaming the Soviet Union and its allies. Of the 83 defendants before the National Court in Bratislava, eight others were charged solely under these same provisions, but they were either acquitted or given lighter sentences. Only Esterházy received such a severe punishment.

If the question is simply whether Esterházy was guilty of these charges, the answer must be yes. He had, beyond doubt, repeatedly made disparaging remarks about both the Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Republic. Although he was not a key figure in the creation of Slovak autonomy or the independent Slovak state—the two events identified in the decree as central to Czechoslovakia’s breakup—his political activity nevertheless contributed to the country’s disintegration in 1938–1939, as did that of many Czech and Slovak politicians, often to a much greater extent than Esterházy’s. Yet none of them received the death penalty. The real issue, then, is whether Esterházy’s conduct under these two charges truly amounted to crimes deserving capital punishment, and why he alone was condemned to the harshest possible sentence for actions for which others escaped with little or no penalty.

The most plausible conclusion is that Esterházy was treated with exceptional severity because he was Hungarian and that his sentence was intended as a judgment on the Hungarian community as a whole. This view is reinforced by data published by Antonín Rašla on retribitional proceedings, which show that 68% of those convicted (including district and local people’s courts) were of Hungarian nationality. This was no coincidence. It was directly tied to the population exchange agreement between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, which gave Czechoslovakia the right, beyond the parity-based transfers, to unilaterally expel any Hungarians convicted as “major war criminals” under Paragraphs 1–4 of the Slovak National Council’s Retribution Decree No. 33, or as “minor war criminals” under Paragraph 5 of the same decree.

Accordingly, on February 13, 1946, the Bratislava Office of the Interior Commissioner instructed regional branches of the National Security Corps to bring charges against as many Hungarians as possible and to do so rapidly. That summer, the Office of the Justice Commissariat directed all people’s courts to deal exclusively with cases against Hungarians, while prosecutors were encouraged to file mass indictments without the need for supporting investigations. It was deemed sufficient, for example, if an individual had taken part in welcoming Hungarian troops in 1938. Yet most of these mass indictments were never heard by the district people’s courts, which dismissed them for lack of credible evidence.

In any case, the prevailing atmosphere and conditions are well illustrated by the words of Ivan Štefánik, the interior officer of the Commissariat acting as the Slovak government. Explaining to Daniel Okáli in Paris why the planned number of Hungarians had not been brought before the people’s courts, he remarked: “I had no authorization to order judges to declare guilty even those about whose activities we had no information.”

While this does not prove that Esterházy’s trial was rigged, it does show that the government was willing to manipulate the justice system in order to achieve its nation-state objectives. For this reason, I do not find it far-fetched to suggest that, alongside the

thousands of Hungarians sentenced to lesser punishments, the authorities also needed a symbolic verdict: one that would publicly justify the charge of collective guilt against Hungarians proclaimed in the Košice government program. That thankless role fell to János Esterházy.

Overall, my position does not fundamentally differ from that of my colleague Schvarc: I also accept the historical legitimacy of the retribitional proceedings carried out under Decree No. 33/1945 of the Slovak National Council, as well as the fact that Esterházy was brought before the National Court. Where I part company with him, however, is in my view that the trial of Esterházy and the sentence handed down were problematic in several respects. The arguments of those who criticize the trial cannot simply be dismissed, and this is a subject that still calls for further research.

Because deeper research is still lacking (for instance, we know very little about the first 30 years of Esterházy's life, his education, or even his family relationships), we can for now only sketch the broad contours of his life and work. What emerges is the portrait of a real, flesh-and-blood man who was a contradictory figure in both his private and political life. To be fair, he lived in a profoundly contradictory age. He was not a democrat who could be held up as a model for young people today, but neither was he a fascist. He was a conservative, right-wing politician who, before 1938, saw the revision of the Trianon borders as his chief mission, and after 1939 shifted to defending the interests of Hungarians within the Slovak state. In pursuing these goals, he dealt with both allies and opponents in a largely pragmatic way.

Esterházy lived at a time when very few managed to preserve their human and political integrity, their consistency, or their moral purity. Although some still regard him as one of those few, I do not. His documented efforts to save Jews show that he was capable of self-reflection and never crossed the boundaries set by his deep Christian convictions. This deserves recognition, and it should also be acknowledged that postwar justice treated him unfairly. However, that is not the same as calling for his legal rehabilitation. That is not the historian's task.

Before getting there, however, it may be worth recalling Štefan Šutaj's proposal: Slovak historiography should approach Esterházy with the seriousness he merits, by first collecting all the relevant sources and then building its own account of him. Only on this basis can a truly meaningful scholarly debate begin about who János Esterházy was.