

Women and Politics: Nationalism and Femininity in Interwar Hungary.  
By Balázs Sipos. Trondheim: Trondheim Studies on East European  
Cultures & Societies, 2019. 163 pp.

The English-language monograph by Balázs Sipos, which focuses on an era of Hungarian women's history on which no comprehensive historical analysis had yet been published, is a long overdue contribution to the secondary literature. Sipos is associate professor and head of the Women's History Research Centre (*Nőtörténeti Kutatóközpont*) at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. He is also a widely-published author on Hungarian women's history and media history. His present work is significant in part because, with the notable exceptions of the books and articles by Andrea Pető and Judith Szapor, very few English-language works have been published on the history of women in Hungary in the first half of the twentieth century.

Sipos does not limit his focus to women's history of the interwar period, but examines also the second half of the Dualist Era and World War I. Given his methodological background in media history and his exhaustive analysis of the periodization of women's history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he is able to discuss long-term changes and place his arguments in a wider context. He sets out to offer a combination of political, media, and cultural history by treating these fields of inquiry as an organic whole, an aspiration which he admirably achieves with this book.

Sipos has studied almost every aspect of women's lives and the ways in which their lives were affected by dramatically shifting attitudes towards female emancipation. He argues that the media "created and transmitted an ideology of [...] emancipation encouraging women to be prepared for independent life" (p.6), not only before 1918 but also throughout the Horthy era. To support his hypothesis, he draws on contemporary Hungarian periodicals, women's magazines, literary pieces, lexicons, and products of the Western media, such as movies and novels.

After providing a general political, economic, and social overview of the era, Sipos highlights the most important milestones in Hungarian women's emancipation between 1867 and 1939 by examining different trends in women's movements and organizational culture. These details are essential, as they enable him to introduce his highly innovative viewpoints related to the periodization of women's history in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Hungary. Sipos

breaks away from the traditional models and argues that, “rather than deactivating feminism, the war generated new problems and complicated old ones” (p.24). Furthermore, he proposes that it is high time to reevaluate women’s history in the interwar period, an opinion I fully share. In the seven chapters of the book, Sipos demonstrates several times that the whole era (not only the decades before 1918) were characterized by growing engagement in public affairs by women. The most important factor in this field was that women continuously tried to adjust to newly-emerging challenges, and alongside new participants, new consensuses also appeared on the scene.

Sipos insists that the interwar period was not characterized by “feminine passivity” (p.25), because women remained active in the public sphere in the 1920 and 1930s. He thus challenges the traditional periodization of women’s history regarding the 19th and 20th centuries and offers a perspective which is entirely new to the secondary literature. Sipos claims that the first period of women’s history lasted from the 1860s (not from 1867) until the turn of the century. The second one, he suggests, began around 1900 and lasted until the years following the Second World War. He justifies his argument with several sociocultural reasons, including the development of different branches of women’s organizations and the extension of the institutional frameworks of women’s institutional education. Within this second period, he distinguishes “three temporary ‘subperiods’” (p.45), namely the period between 1914 and 1922, the years of the Great Depression (1929–1934), and the “period of anti-Semitic measures taken during the Second World War” (p.45). This approach is highly innovative, although it might have been useful to supplement it with a further a “subperiod” between 1900/1904–1913/1914, as several turning points in the women’s movement came during this period of roughly 15 years.

In Chapters 3–7, Sipos analyses the extent to which anti-feminist and anti-emancipation policies can be said to have influenced the situation of women between the two World Wars. In his assessment, this is or more precisely should be the central question of interwar women’s history in Hungary. In the third chapter, he studies the role and significance of World War I in the alternation of women’s political, economic, and social positions. In Chapter 4, he examines interpretations of the notion of the “modern” women, women’s issues, and feminism in the contemporary Hungarian media. He also considers the neo-Biedermeier portrayal and those women who stayed at home. The end of this section gives important data on women’s employment as well. After examining the different types of discourse about and for women in the periodical press,

Sipos studies the transnational female role models (i.e., the Flapper and the Garçonne), the images and interpretations of which influenced Hungarian public opinion. In the last section, he gives an overview on how contemporary Hungarian movies approached and displayed female roles.

Sipos works with a significant source base and uses altogether 19 contemporary Hungarian periodicals, of which he discusses two in greater detail (*A Magyar Asszony* [The Hungarian Woman], which was the official organ of the National Association of Hungarian Women (*Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége*), and *Új Idők* [New Times], edited by Ferenc Herczeg) (pp.91–111). He also relies on *Ius Suffragii*, the official organ of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (later renamed the International Alliance of Women), which is an almost inexhaustible source on the women's movement before 1924. Among these periodicals, the reader might miss the more in-depth analysis of the official organ of the Feminists' Association (*Feministák Egyesülete*). Naturally, Sipos notes that the Feminists' Association weakened considerably after the regime changes of 1918–1919, but the publication of *A Nő. Feminista Folyóirat* [The Woman: A Feminist Periodical] continued until 1927/1928. Although it was unable to regain its former positions, its number of members, and the number of readers of its periodical within the framework of the “new women's movement” of the Horthy era, the Feminists' Association succeeded in redefining itself and its goals in the early 1920s. That meant, however, that within a narrower framework than before, it could operate until its ban in 1942 and then between 1946 and 1949. With regards to the organizations, it is perhaps unfortunate that their names are only given in English translation, with no mention of their original Hungarian names.

The volume is rich in citations from the sources and also in interesting statistical data and illustrations. Sipos primarily addresses fellow scholars, but his book will still capture the interest of a readership curious to know more about the history of the interwar period. Most importantly, Sipos's monograph will do a great deal to further the integration of scholarship on women's history in Hungary into the international body of secondary literature, which today is perhaps more important than it has ever been.

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