

Queer Budapest, 1873–1961

By Anita Kurimay. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago University Press, 2020. Pp. 336. Paper \$32.50. ISBN 978-0226705798.

Judith Szapor

McGill University

This is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on the history of nonnormative sexualities in the context of urban modernity. The book spans the almost nine decades between 1873 (the year Pest, Buda, and Óbuda were merged into Budapest) and 1961 (the year that marked the decriminalization of male homosexual acts in Hungary) and promises a “history of nonnormative sexualities in Budapest as they were understood, experienced, and policed” — it reclaims and, indeed, celebrates queerness as “an integral part of establishing a modern Hungarian capital” (5).

This tumultuous period of Hungarian history was characterized by rapid industrialization, social and cultural modernization, two world wars, two revolutions, a counterrevolution, and multiple regime changes. At the center of all these developments, Budapest — alongside Berlin the fastest-growing metropolis of turn-of-the-century Europe — became the site of a remarkably resilient homosexual subculture which, Anita Kurimay argues, outlived all these changes, at least until the early 1940s. While acknowledging the fundamental ruptures from liberal to illiberal conservative, to fascist, and, lastly, communist regimes, her exploration of each regime’s treatment of nonnormative sexual behavior subverts accepted periodization. In the process, she finds surprising continuities and manages to overturn or at least shake up many of our assumptions.

The six chapters cover this long and, in historiographical terms, fragmented period evenly. The first two chapters are devoted to the prewar, liberal era, detailing, respectively, the establishment of the Budapest police’s “homosexual registry” that survived well into the interwar decades, and the popular and influential works by two contemporary journalists about the hidden life of homosexuals. While the former reveals the rise of modern, “scientific” tools and the disciplinary aspect of policing during Budapest’s liberal golden age, the latter points to the birth of a thriving queer urban scene. Chapter 3 unearths a gem, the project of the “Experimental Criminology Department” undertaken during the short-lived 1919 Republic of Councils, to study, treat, and, if possible, “rehabilitate” homosexuals. The Department was attached to the notorious Revolutionary Tribunal, created to mete out terror to enemies of the proletarian revolution — but its story, reconstructed here, highlights the utopian side of the revolution. The episode fits into recent scholarship, contesting the supposedly permissive views of the early Soviet government on sexuality, and hints at a darker, controlling agenda, to be realized under the second, post-1945 incarnation of communist rule in Hungary.

The fourth chapter, the true centerpiece of the book, details a series of divorce and libel court cases stretching between 1923 and 1927; a complex and meandering story, it is told here with gusto and clarity. One of the cases revolved around the accusation of a homosexual affair involving the regime’s iconic woman politician, the conservative, antisemitic writer Cécile Tormay, long rumored to be a lesbian. Taken together with the following chapter, Chapter 4 presents what may be the book’s most provocative argument: that the authorities of the illiberal, arch-conservative Horthy regime not only protected, on occasion, their own but found an accommodation with the flourishing male gay subculture of the city. The last chapter provides an overview of the years between 1941 and 1961, unified by a newly repressive treatment of nonnormative sexuality — first by increasingly extremist right-wing governments, then by the postwar communist dictatorship. Here, it is not necessarily the

arguments but the departure from traditional periodization that represents the author's bold take on historiographical orthodoxy.

Kurimay's discussion of the defining, policing, and regulating of sexual norms, homosexual practices, and their boundaries with criminality is carefully grounded in the political, legal, medical, and psychological discourses around (mainly male) homosexuality. The study relies on a wealth of archival sources, ranging from police and court records to contemporary medical treatises, personal papers, as well as the contemporary press and literary works. Although some of the key sources have been previously explored by the leading Hungarian scholar of queer history, Judit Takács, and others — and the overlaps could have been more closely indicated — they are considered here in a consistently nuanced manner, frequently read against the grain.

Inevitably, there are minor mistakes — the Republic of Councils lasted 133 days, and not, as alternately stated, five or six months; the dates for the Vienna Awards are 1938 and 1940, and they returned to Hungary not only the pre-Trianon northern parts but also Northern Transylvania; the dates and details cited for the introduction of universal suffrage are incorrect. There are some misses in the otherwise impressive bibliography, such as Béla Bodó's recent, excellent monograph on the White Terror, as well as my own comprehensive history of the Hungarian women's movements, with two of its chapters devoted to Tormay and the National Alliance of Hungarian Women (MANSz). Some of the author's otherwise refreshingly counterintuitive arguments seem overstated or fall flat: John Lukacs and his deeply conservative if lively *Budapest 1900* is set up as the standard work against which to argue, but is hardly the last word on the Hungarian fin-de-siècle. The similarly disputed, supposedly common view of Hungary as a backwater of modern medicine and clinical psychology before 1918 is obviously skewed. The studies cited as holding the revolutions of 1918–1919 responsible for Trianon represent only one, right-wing historiographical trend. There are inconsistencies in the representation of the Horthy era and the dynamic of its traditional and radical-right elements. The claim that the *Affaire* Tormay represented the greatest political scandal of the Horthy era is an exaggeration.

Lastly, the chronological framework that ends the narrative in 1961 is a reminder that legislation and legal documents rarely tell the story of the lived experience and widely held social attitudes. Male homosexuality continued to be highly stigmatized, and the practice of blackmail for the recruiting of informants long survived the legal act of decriminalization. Hence, as the author argues in the epilogue, in the post-1989 era, far from becoming more tolerated, homosexuality would be combined with gay men's supposed collaboration with the communist regime and end up doubly stigmatized.

An important question left to future studies concerns the sources of continuing, stubborn prejudices, running deep in Hungarian society, aptly exploited by yet another arch-conservative, authoritarian government, today's ruling Fidesz. A recent political scandal offers a fitting postscript and commentary on hypocrisy, the default mode of illiberal governments. In December 2020, József Szájer, a European MP was caught in a police raid breaking up a "gay orgy" in Brussels, reported by neighbors for breaching the pandemic-related ban on social gatherings. Szájer, a leading and founding member of Fidesz is also the main author of Hungary's new constitution, known for its uncompromising stance on Hungary's supposed Christian family values and attack on same-sex marriage. Szájer had to resign his seat, but the episode was quickly swept under the rug. Kurimay's study goes a long way to illuminate the political agendas as well as the ideological and medical discourses that have contributed to the continuing social prejudices but also, in paradoxical ways, helped to keep the queer subculture and the promise of modernity and tolerance alive.

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