

Spotlighting Deák's Admirers: Lay and Specialist, Then and Now

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Abstract | This introduction to the special issue of the Journal of Austrian-American History, “How East Central Europe Changed: The István Deák School of History,” discusses the salient points of the twelve contributions to the issue. It compares these specialists’ analyses of what made Deák’s work so important with the jury comments from the 2020 Friuli Storia Prize, which was made up mostly of lay judges. The introduction also gives insight into how the special issue was conceived, how it intersected with the January 2023 death of the main subject of the collection, and how this influenced the pieces included.

Keywords | István Deák, European history, East Central European history, Hungary, Habsburg Empire, World War II, Holocaust, Jewish history

It was September 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing. István Deák was living with his family in the countryside halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, a situation he described as simultaneously ideal and eerie. I was locked up in a beautiful apartment in Florence, Italy, trying to salvage my sabbatical time with all the archives closed, slowly wilting from the uselessness of this endeavor and the ever-less-bearable social isolation. István and I wrote each other frequently during the first months of the pandemic, though he was a much better correspondent than I and often reminded me of that fact. One morning I received an email from him that was decidedly different in tone from the usual missives filled with pictures of animal life retaking town squares and news of Orbán’s latest affronts to democracy. This email was joyful, excited, and a bit anxious. He was happy because he had just been



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notified that the 2019 Italian translation of his last book, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II*, had received the FriuliStoria National Prize for Contemporary History.¹ Winning awards is always fun, but this award was special. István was the first non-Italian to receive this honor and the three-hundred-person committee selecting him was made up not just of academics but also included mostly nonspecialist readers of history who chose his book as the most exemplary publication of the year. The first foreigner and selected by a “lay” audience! This encapsulated so much of what István cared about: he thought of history as something bigger than borders, states, and professional practitioners.

István’s worry, however, came from the process of accepting the award. First, somehow, he had lost the email announcing the good news, and his daughter and I were put to work figuring out how to re-receive it. (In the end, Éva retrieved it electronically before I contacted the FriuliStoria people to resend it.) But he was also nervous because they wanted him to produce a video responding to readers’ comments about why they had selected his book. Technology regularly exasperated István (as it does many of us), but that wasn’t the real issue. The prize committee did not realize that István did not know Italian and therefore had no way to read the 30+ pages of readers’ contributions. The video needed to be produced almost immediately; István’s regular translator was unavailable. And, so, another email arrived in my inbox asking for a favor. In István’s own words: “Nor can I think of anyone else but you with the request that you leaf through the text and tell me in one or two sentences, what they are about. Perhaps also you could indicate one or two sentences in the letters to which I could answer on video.”

I must admit: initially, I grumbled. To not go mad in my Florentine gilded cage, I had devised a rigorous daily to-do list that this favor would disrupt. Luckily, I remembered how much István had done for me, stifled my knee-jerk reaction, and told him I’d get him something that day. I’m so glad I did, because reading the comments was not just a pleasure, it was a lesson in what readers look for in history-making—and in how István excelled at exactly those things. I sent him a three-page document summing up what jury members had submitted. I also spotlighted the comments he might like to address in his video. “Almost every response emphasizes how well written and easy to read it is,” was the first sentence of my report. “Almost everyone is amazed at how the book is so compact yet covers so much,” was the second. “Many note how wonderful

1. István Deák, *Europa a processo: Collaborazione, resistenza e giustizia fra guerra e dopoguerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019). For more information on the FriuliStoria prize, see: “Friuli Storia Award,” Associazione Friuli Storia, accessed June 18, 2023, <https://www.friulistoria.it/en/friuli-storia-award/>.

the translation is and how good Guri Schwarz's introduction is," was the third. "Almost everyone thinks this should be required reading for Europeans today," was the final sentence in the brief overview.

But it was the two pages of "spotlighting" comments that are why I'm sharing this story here in the introduction to this special issue, "How East Central Europe Changed: The István Deák School of History." So much of what these lay readers saw in his book echo what the fifteen professional historians here point to in showing how István's approach to history transformed not just what we think but what we ask and therefore what we write and teach. As a tribute to István's conviction that history books are written as much, if not more, for people outside academia as for those within, I use the lay readers' comments from the FriuliStoria prize as organizing principles for my overview of the major themes in the twelve fascinating essays that make up this collection.

The contributions by Alison Frank Johnson and Eliza Ablovatski perhaps best respond to one reader's assessment that what makes Deák's history so special is how he focuses "not just on the 'big questions' or stories . . . , but also on the 'minor' ones, which brings out the human aspects and social sentiments." Frank Johnson's piece unravels how Deák's work on Habsburg caste and honor codes invites us to look past blanket categories of class, religion, ethnicity, or region to understand why historical actors behaved as they did. Frank Johnson sees this as the most thought-provoking part of Deák's method of treating the past like a foreign country, allowing us to consider it in explicitly individual, corporate, and moral terms without falling into the hubris of "knowing" what any protagonist really felt when they made their decisions. Ablovatski expands on this theme, pointing out how Deák consistently demanded that historians examine the past not simply as a collection of possible choices but by taking note of the limitations on those choices, limitations often either overlooked or retroactively narrativized as choice. For the lay readers, what made Deák's work on World War II so special was similar to what Frank Johnson and Ablovatski see in his work on Habsburgia: the way his method interweaves the "big histories" with the often unnoticed "small experiences" to explain how and why the world was built up, dismantled, and then built up again the way it was.

Gábor Egry's and Norman Naimark's contributions dovetail with several jurors' insistence that "it's no accident that this author comes from an American academic environment: this has given him a means of retaining a neutral and objective position regarding questions which still today in Europe we cannot discuss calmly." Egry's analysis of the Hungarian reception of Deák's second book on Lajos Kossuth and the 1848 Hungarian Revolution shows that though many appreciated the facts Deák brought to the fore and his nuanced approach to understanding the role of personal charisma in history, few in Hungary managed to differentiate their political need for national self-understanding

from historical analysis, as Deák's work consistently asks readers (and his fellow historians) to do. Naimark, meanwhile, positions Deák's scholarship on World War II and the Holocaust in the fields dedicated to these topics, emphasizing how István's special status as Hungarian-American, insider-outsider let him write in a way that prioritized emotional distance from a subject matter he, too,

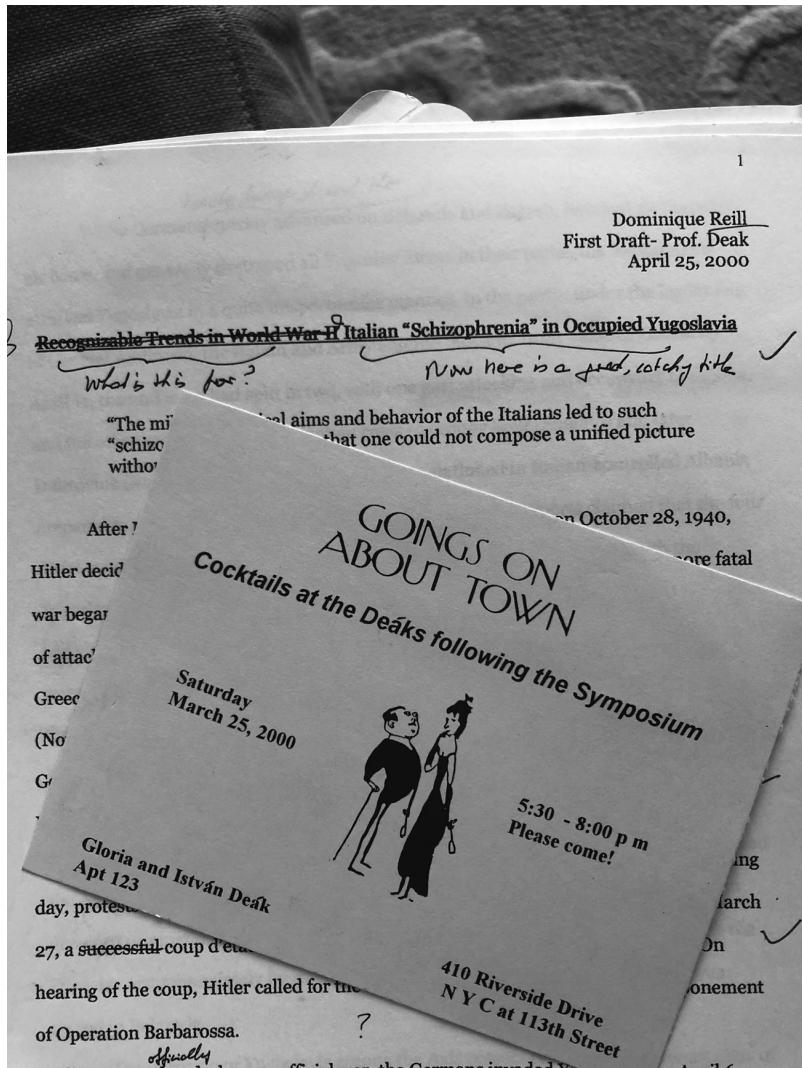


Figure 1 | István Deák worked tirelessly to support his students intellectually, while encouraging them socially. An example here are the myriad of suggestions given for revision to a first-draft of a first-year student paper coupled with an invitation to a cocktail party at the Deáks' home. (Photo courtesy of author)



Figure 2 | István Deák's home office at 410 Riverside Drive after he moved to California, empty for the first time of the hundreds of books he had collected and consulted for close to fifty years. (Photo courtesy of the author)

had lived through, which thanks to his deft pen led to the creation of highly satisfying histories that were both empathetic and dispassionate.

Marsha Rozenblit's and Rebekah Klein-Pejšová's essays most directly address what almost every jury member underscored as one of the most intriguing aspects of *Europe on Trial*: how Deák didn't treat Jews as victims

of the European story but instead as Europeans themselves who were left with “almost no choices, except maybe whether to die slow or fast, whereas others could choose between collaboration and resistance.” Rozenblit’s piece provides an essential review of how Deák put Jews at the center of all his works on European history, seeing their story as key to understanding the promises and failures of liberalism, state-building, and nationalism. Klein-Pejšová agrees with much of Rozenblit’s analysis but questions what it means to look at Jewish history so as to understand the assimilatory potentials of liberalism instead of focusing on the Jews who couldn’t or didn’t want to assimilate, whether because of economics, class, or religious belief. What both show, however, is how Deák’s work opened so many questions about what histories of European Jewry are doing and where they can go next.

Nancy Wingfield’s piece and Holly Case and Máté Rigó’s joint contribution focus on how important Deák’s teaching, mentoring, and writing has been in putting the “gray zones” of experience, as one jury member put it, at the center of historical analysis. Wingfield traces how Deák’s insistence for us to remember that no one was just one thing (a nationalist, a mother, a farmer, a socialist, a soldier, a nurse) helped bring gender analysis into the historiography of East Central Europe for both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Case and Rigó support this, emphasizing the importance of Deák’s method of considering the historical subject (and his own contemporaries) as a bundle of “paradoxical plurals,” one that can be capable of great moments of creation as well as devastating moments of violence and destruction. Both pieces celebrate the way Deák trained historians to treat people as more than inherently one thing or another and how that has broadened the questions we ask of the past.

The contributions by Cynthia Paces, Jennifer Foray, and the joint contribution by Benjamin Frommer and Paul Hanebrink emphasize attributes many of the nonspecialists thought were the most important aspect of history-making generally and what they thought Deák’s book excelled at: to “dispel false myths” and attract people to “want to learn more.” Paces shows how Deák’s training and example taught several generations of scholars of East Central Europe not to trust simplistic state-sponsored tales bent on convincing people that today’s nationalist realities were inevitable. Foray argues that Deák’s eagle-eyed attention to what tropes hide, to the dangers of binaries, and to historians’ moral obligation to guide and challenge readers helped build greater understanding of World War II, in the field and outside it. Frommer and Hanebrink draw on their experience to discuss the effect this approach had on the thousands of undergraduate students Deák taught in his circa fifty years at Columbia University. They show how he made complicated worlds come alive to young men and women before they set off to build worlds on their own.

These three contributions underscore how Deák's role as a historian and a teacher were one and the same: he cared and instilled care.

One jury member explained his choice of Deák's book for the FriuliStoria prize by saying how much he appreciated its insistence on "problematizing the reality" of today's nation-states and consolidated nationalisms. We see this as the central theme in Pieter Judson's piece. Judson was the original instigator of the 2021 American Historical Association online panel, which served as the much smaller precursor for this special issue. In both that virtual setting and in more detail here, Judson emphasizes how path-breaking it was when Deák taught and showed the historical payoffs of questioning whether nationalism was the driving force for how East Central Europeans lived their lives. Almost all the contributions here echo Judson's claim, but his piece serves as the springboard of the special issue, the best entry point for diving into this pool of remarkable essays to see how the "Deák School" changed the way East Central European history is told, understood, and questioned. Larry Wolff's touching afterword serves as the perfect way to exit this collection, reflecting the breadth of what Deák inspired.

Because of the virtual format of that conference a little over two years ago, István could attend and listen to many of the ideas expressed in these pieces. He was deeply flattered, although a little embarrassed. He kept thanking everyone; he expressed appreciation and warmth to all involved. But he couldn't let the event just be congratulatory; no history he was involved in could or should be that easy. Instead, to heat things up, he initiated a fascinating interchange with Professor Atina Grossmann about some of the gender battles of yore. Everyone perked up as the culture wars of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were rehashed. We also smiled a little, not because they were easy or over, but because it was so like István not to let things be smooth or uncomplicated. By the end of the panel, there were tears in almost everyone's eyes, not of sadness—or not only—but from the pleasure of once again being (virtually) together, debating with István about history and the world.

In the months after that panel, István's 96-year-old body finally started to give in to the pressures of a long, well-lived life. Instead of resting, he worked whenever and however he could to finish his memoir.² His eyesight by this point had become very poor; his hearing had been almost nonexistent for a while. Nonetheless, he exchanged emails with friends and family to the bitter end in January 2023. The last email I received from him was a week before his death. I had sent him a silly picture from Miami wishing him a happy New Year. The photo featured a balcony feast overlooking the water, with many

2. István Deák, *Maratoni életem—Emlékírat* (Budapest: Kronosz Bookkiado Kft., 2023). Originally written in Hungarian in the last years of the author's life, *My Marathon Life—A Memoir* will soon be made available in English.

different pots of lentils steaming and ready to be consumed. He responded saying “Which house in which country are you talking about? It could be a part of the Mediterranean, but certainly not Siberia.” This comment referenced my seemingly age-old laments about living in Florida—a tropical Siberia for European Studies—instead of New York—the epicenter for scholars of Europe living in the United States. I laughed immediately. István loved to tease, and the idyllic picture I sent him could not be left to just be pretty. It had to speak of more and perhaps bring a different kind of smile to one’s face.

This special issue started before István’s death, before we began mourning the loss of a great teacher, a great historian, a great friend: a great man. But now he is gone, and so this collection, just like this introduction, is imbued with more personal memories and emotions than is customary for an academic publication. I’ve decided this is not just a good and inevitable thing but perhaps the most proper way to honor the historian who brought the intimate worlds of unknown, “unimportant” people into big history.³ After all, it was exactly the unknown people on the FriuliStoria jury who recognized in István’s work something important and rare: the ability to build a missing but crucial story using both his considerable historical skills and his gift of being present and personal while managing to stand outside politicized and accepted narratives. I am so glad to have read those jurors’ comments and to have been able to share them with you, and I hope you enjoy the essays collected here, each of which is far more complicated and thoughtful than my few spotlighting lines have conveyed.

Dominique Kirchner Reill received her PhD with Distinction from Columbia University and is professor in history at the University of Miami. Her first book, Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice, was published by Stanford University Press in 2012 and was awarded the Center for Austrian Studies’ Book Award and Honorable Mention from the Smith Award. Her next book, The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire, came out in 2020 with Harvard University’s Belknap Press and received an Honorable Mention from the Jelavich Book Prize. Her current project is “The Habsburg Mayor of New York: Fiorello LaGuardia.” She serves as an editor for the book series Central European Studies, Vice-President Elect of the Central European History Society, and a board member of the Botstiber Institute for Austrian-American Studies.

3. Another recent group of articles reassessing István Deák’s scholarship and influence in promoting the study of European history takes a similar tack of mixing the academic and the personal, for many of the same reasons. See Csaba Békés, Volker Berghahn, Holly Case, Attila Pók, and Moshik Temkin, “Tribute to the Scholarship and Legacy of István Deák,” H-Diplo, Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum, June 21, 2023, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/jti.pdf>.