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FORGOTTEN HEROES, WHO ARE REMEMBERED FOREVER

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Csaba Stenge's work on the history of Hungarian military and aviation has already enriched the country's historiography with numerous volumes and studies. His primary area of research is the history of Hungary in World War II, extrapolating the history of the Royal Hungarian Air Force. His works are published in Hungarian and English. This volume is the author's second book published by Helion & Company.¹

"Forgotten Heroes" is a fitting title for a work that introduces the ace pilots of the Royal Hungarian 'Honvéd' Air Force. Twentieth-century Hungarian history is full of historical problems and events that lack social consensus; such as the question of the controversial opinions about historical figures. This is particularly true in the field of military history and the Second World War. Although it often seems that there is some form of consensus, the ideological beliefs of individuals and groups often override reasonable evaluation with the concept of hero, and heroism also belonging here. While the aftermath of the Great War ended with the myth of heroism and sacrifice surrounding its victims and participants, this tendency broke down in Hungary and Eastern Europe after the Second World War. In the countries occupied by the Soviet Union, the perception of World War II was wholly subordinate to Soviet imperial and ideological interests. The honvéds² were also stigmatized in their own country and their actions were presented through an ideological filter. After the collapse of the communist regime, both national and personal memory and historiography allowed for a more objective evaluation and remembrance. Personal memoirs of veteran pilots were published, and the author himself was one of those who had the opportunity to learn about the great deeds of these brave pilots. The personal writing by Tibor Tobak was some kind of a turning point.³ We did not just learn who the Pumas had been, or found out who the "Old Puma" was, we were shown that the sky had had Hungarian heroes as well. Historical studies and research soon embraced the topic, attracting numerous researchers including the author, Csaba Stenge, who, in his great work, meticulously explored the history of our pilots.

The aspect of national and military memory also means that besides the well-known and treasured heroes of other nations, we can also list Hungarian airmen who will thus be given a worthy place in the pantheon of Hungarian and international military and aviation history.

In addition to its memorial value, the book also has outstanding scientific and professional contributions. The author's work in English was preceded by extensive research and

¹ The first book *Baptism of Fire, The First Combat Experiences of the Royal Hungarian Air Force and Slovak Air Force, March 1939*. Solihull: Helion & Company, 2013.

² 'Honvéd' is a common name of the Hungarian soldier in the World War II. Means a soldier, who defends his/her native land ('hon': Native land, 'véd': defends).

³ Tobak, T. *Pumák földön-égen*. Budapest: Háttér Kiadó, 1989.

well documented publications. First published in Hungarian in 2006,⁴ the book on the life of Hungarian aces was followed by a second, revised and expanded edition in 2016⁵. Compared to the Hungarian edition of 2016, the English edition includes many new features and additions. Such being the discovery of new information regarding László Molnár's aerial victories or the rehabilitation of Lajos Benkő.

The main and most extensive parts of the 438-page volume (pages 74–428) are, of course, the biographies of ace pilots. In addition, the personal, professional and historical introductions to the topic are excellently written. The first seventy-three pages consist of the recommendation of Lieutenant János Mátyás, a retired pilot of the Hungarian Royal Air Force, followed by a personal foreword by retired MALEV pilot Dezső Szentgyörgyi Jr., the son of the most successful Hungarian ace, Dezső Szentgyörgyi. The author's own foreword gives us an insight into the circumstances, the difficulties, the resources being explored, and the individuals and institutions who supported this great work. The general conclusions of the next chapter are drawn from biographical data provided by statistics. The chapter entitled "A Short History of Hungarian Air Victories" is much more exciting. This is a brief overview of the time that began with the air combat in Felvidék, which took place in October 1938, until the end of the war. The contents of this chapter add some historical background to the biographies presented.

When describing the combat performance of fighter pilots, perhaps the most telling figure is the number of aerial victories they achieved. Anyone who can confirm the destruction of at least five enemy combat planes in aerial combat was considered to be an 'ace' pilot in World War I. So it seems simple. Apparently. Firstly, what is considered an air victory is an important question. Then, how to verify the pilot was responsible for the kill? It is crucial information regarding the performance and efficiency of not just the pilot but the unit as well. Stenge devotes a whole chapter to the concept showing the practices of the Royal Hungarian Air Force through contemporary regulations and documents.

There is also a whole chapter on contemporary Hungarian air combat tactics and combat procedures. In addition to technical background and individual quality, this is probably one of the most important factors that can determine the success of a pilot or a flying unit. It follows the tactical development of the Hungarian Air Force between 1938 and 1945. The arc of this is well illustrated by the fact that in 1938-39 Hungarian pilots fought with CR-32 biplane aircraft against the Czechoslovak Avia B-534 fighters, and by 1945 they were flying against hundreds of four-engine US heavy bombers.

If one of the most important indicators of pilots' performance is their kill count, their honours are the visible recognition of this. The military leadership of that time attached importance to these results not only in military aspect. Well-decorated pilots of excellent skill also played an important role in propaganda, both for the military and general public. Of course, these meant not only Hungarian military medals or badges, but also those awarded by the allied air forces. The following section summarizes this diverse system.

After these historical and professional introductions, there is another important chapter, which is a Comparative Table of Ranks of the Air Forces (Hungarian, German, Soviet, and US) involved in combat, followed by a list of abbreviations used in the volume. It is note-

⁴ Stenge, B. Cs. *Elfelejtett hősök: A Magyar Királyi Honvéd Légierő ászai a második világháborúban*. Nagykovács: Püedlo Kiadó, 2006.

⁵ Stenge, B. Cs. *Elfelejtett hősök: A magyar királyi honvéd légierők ászai a második világháborúban*. Budapest: HM Zrínyi Térképészeti és Kommunikációs Szolgáltató Nonprofit Kft., 2016.

worthy that the author also provides an English translation of the Hungarian squadrons and the nicknames of the pilots.

After this thorough historical and professional “appetizer” we get to the “main dish”, the biographies of ace pilots. These are encyclopaedically processed by Stenge. Under the names of the pilots are the most important flight data: first, the number of kills, successes against ground targets, number of combat sorties and combat hours flown, then the callsign and identifications number. After that is the list of decorations, charted combat victories, and finally, the aircraft flown. These data are followed by the pilot’s biography: his family background, years of military service, training, war activities, and the post-war lives and deaths of survivors of the war. Personal accounts of air battles make the story even more lively and exciting. However, these are not just personal recollections: they tell the story and provide an overall evaluation of the World War, the Hungarian Air Force and the Army from the territorial expansion in 1938 to the end of the war and beyond. Because their story did not end in 1945. The survivors could not return home in peace. For the occupying Soviet power and then under the communist dictatorship they became *persona non grata*, their accomplishments forgotten. Those who stayed in Hungary often awaited death sentence or imprisonment while others had to choose a new country. Famous and little-known names, lives, tragic and uplifting moments. What they have in common is the honour for their homeland, their comrades, combating almost always an overwhelming enemy – enemy air forces or the communist regime: Dezső Szentgyörgyi, ‘Drumi’, ‘Cica’, György Debródy, László Molnár... the list is long.

The biographies are categorized by the number of victories achieved. The first major category is the most successful aces, with a twenty-plus kill count. Then there are the pilots with a ten-plus kill count, and those with a count of five to nine. Beside the fighter pilots we can read about the bomber, reconnaissance, and ground attack pilots, as well as those who achieved their air victories with other air forces. (US Army Air Forces, Luftwaffe).

This richly illustrated volume presents well-documented biographies with multiple unpublished photos; it is the most comprehensive study of the surviving and accessible sources, literature and memoirs to this day. Out of the scattered, incomplete, and monumentally vast database the author created an impressive work due to his great expertise and diligence. Nevertheless, I think it is not only the length and content of the book which is commendable but also the author’s effort to reveal the unknown aspects of the past, to commemorate his heroes to professionals and the general public alike, demonstrating his greatness as a premier historian.



Stenge B., Csaba. Forgotten Heroes. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019. 438 p.