Writing a comprehensive historical monograph about the Hungarian Defense Forces in World War II is no doubt a challenging enterprise. To do so successfully, the author must avoid the trap of supporting different political ideologies used to legitimize various movements, and contend with the overwhelming lack of sources, many of which were destroyed during the war (10). In addition, the historian must grapple with copious myths and false interpretations dominating the post-1945 historical literature in both Hungary and Europe. Thus, the task assumed by Krisztián Ungváry was marked by numerous difficulties.

Ungváry, nevertheless, successfully copes with these obstacles, offering a new interpretation of both the Hungarian army's and the country's involvement in World War II. He incorporates into his analysis the recent scholarship on the war industry (Dombrády 2003), and the role of military and civil diplomacy (Szakály 1991; Vargyai 2001), and offers detailed information about the fighting by Hungarian soldiers on various war fronts extracted from existing secondary literature (Ravasz 2001; Szabó 2001; Számvéber 2001). Moreover, he delivers a thoughtful and original analysis based on more than a decade of research. His examination touches on topics largely absent from previous studies, including the role of the Hungarian occupying forces in the Soviet Union and Poland (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) and their participation in the Holocaust (Chapter 3). He also develops a complete index of the Hungarian troops that served in World War II (Chapter 10). Due to the comprehensive nature of his work, the reader can easily appreciate the unquestionable strength of facts and documents supporting Ungvary's work, and the structure and logic of the text are clear and easy to follow. The overall strength of the text notwithstanding, there are a few statements in this lengthy, 530-page book not supported by precise sources or more precise context. These include, for example, the casualties of the Army Group South (305), and in the second chapter, “Occupying the Soviet Union and Poland, 1941-44,” we encounter repetitions and a less rigorous explanatory logic (nearly the same story appears on pages 87 and 149). However, these shortcomings clearly derive from the nature and complexity of the topic and not from negligence by the author.

Throughout the book, Ungváry challenges popular myths about Hungary’s military effort during the Second World War. While the Hungarian army is perhaps best known for its participation in the battles of the Kárpát Group, the Quick Corps and the Second Army along the River Don (Chapters 1 and 4)——we can find this not only in secondary school text books but also in academic publications——the author proves that the Hungarian Defense Forces had a decisive role in the occupation of parts of the Soviet Union (38) and in the defense of the Carpathians and Hungary between 1944-1945 (Chapters 6 and 7). Indeed, the 90,000 soldiers composing the Hungarian Occupation Forces amounted to one-fourth of the strength of the Nazi army in the occupied Soviet territories, and they controlled half million square kilometers (nearly 200,000 square miles) of territory. In addition, German documents prove the Wehrmacht's supply lines would have collapsed had Hungarian divisions not defended their railway networks (38, 153).

Hungarian troops had similarly important functions in 1944-1945. After the success of the Soviet offensive Operation Bagration, the First Hungarian Army served as rearguard of the German Middle Army Group (270). The Hungarian oil industry also played a decisive role in the supplying fuel to the Third Reich, since the oilfields near Bucharest were inaccessible for Germany after Romania shifted its alliance to the Allies (430). The strategic significance of
Hungary is underscored by the fact that this was the site of the last major German offensive (Operation Frühlingserwachen or “Operation Spring Awakening”), and that during this attack more tanks were deployed than during the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes (360). In January 1945, half the German tanks on the Eastern Front were engaged in the Carpathian Basin (354), which translates to 1,796 tanks and almost 1,000 half-track armored fighting vehicles in March 1945 (458). Although Ungváry notes the strategic position of Hungary during the war, he does not overvalue the Hungarian participation in the war. Rather, he tries to objectively reveal the actual role of Hungary and its army in the conflict, a point that has been wholly undervalued in the last decades.

Ungváry also provides a new perspective on the actions of the Labor Battalions. In the last decades, it has been argued that the intention of the Hungarian government and military leadership with respect to these troops was to kill all objectionable persons, namely Jews and communists. According to this interpretation, unarmed soldiers were forced to fight and suffered terrible casualties. However, Ungváry shows that although on some occasions these men were deployed against Soviet regular troops, and sometimes they were murdered by anti-Semitic and anti-communist Hungarian commanders, they generally had higher rates of survival than regular fighting troops. In 1941-1942 the Labor Battalions had an 8 percent casualty rate, compared to 12 percent for fighting troops (119). Although Labor servicemen became victims of the Horthy regime, and conditions at the front were indeed terrible, they were not as bad as claims made in historical accounts from the socialist era and even today. Compared to the fate of Jews and communists in other countries, the circumstances of the Hungarian Labor Battalions were much better until the German occupation in March 1944 (Chapter 5), not to mention the irony that even some members of the Arrow Cross Party and other Hungarian Nazi supporters and right-wing radicals were drafted into these Labor Battalions.

The author scrutinizes the Hungarian participation in the genocide in the Soviet Union and compares it with that of Romania, Slovakia and Germany. Although the allies of Nazi Germany and the soldiers of the Wehrmacht only marginally participated in actual murders—most of executions were accomplished by the SS and the Einsatzgruppen—Hungarian occupying divisions and the troops of other German allies played an important role in the collection and transport of Jewish people. Furthermore, the remaining documents and diaries prove that the fate of the captured Jews was well known (109). Ungváry emphasizes, too, that the Einsatzgruppen consisted of no more than 4,000 soldiers, a relatively small group that killed more than 1.3 million people, including partisans and thousands of innocent civilians without assistance (106-107, 134, 140).

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the myth of the Second Hungarian Army. In contrast to the Labor Battalions, some historians have argued that these troops were sent to the River Don to die, mainly because the soldiers who composed that army were non-Hungarian and ill-equipped (Nemeskürti 1973). However, as Ungváry demonstrates, the Second Army possessed approximately half of Hungary’s total weapons stock and three quarters of the country’s transport capacity. Moreover, ethnic minorities made up about 20 percent of the Second Hungarian Army’s troops—a figure that corresponded to their proportion in the Hungarian population (158). Consequently, while the military leadership scrambled to prepare its soldiers for battle, the Hungarian Army was fighting against the Soviet Army, one of the most powerful and well-equipped armies in the world (16).

Although the book is unquestionably the best comprehensive monograph ever written about the participation of the Hungarian Army in World War II, and it is essential reading for anyone...