

2019

## Sunshine: A Cinematic Take on Hungary's Turbulent Century

Matthew E. Kowalski

*La Salle University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kowalski, Matthew E. (2019) "Sunshine: A Cinematic Take on Hungary's Turbulent Century," *The Histories*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 9. Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories/vol4/iss2/9](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol4/iss2/9)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

III



**Sunshine: A Cinematic Take on Hungary's Turbulent Century**

Reviewed by Matthew E. Kowalski

Director Istvan Szabo's 1999 film *Sunshine*, offers a glimpse of the chaotic political history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary as seen through the eyes of three generations of a prominent Jewish family. Starring veteran British actor Ralph Fiennes as the three successive patriarchs of the Sonnenschien {translated as 'sunshine'} clan, the film explores the themes of cultural identity and religious assimilation. In addition, Szabo and playwright Israel Horowitz expose the pervasive cancer of anti-Semitism that characterized all three of modern Hungary's major political systems.

The film's first chapter chronicles Ignatz Sonnenschien's attempts to find a place within mainstream society of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. To compensate for his status as a member of a religious minority, he changes his last name to the more Hungarian sounding ' Sorzs' and adopts an overly patriotic mentality. Both his son Adam and grandson Ivan continue to employ this strategy of conscious cultural assimilation to weather the storm of historical events. In every case the results are tragic, as the society they yearn to join ultimately rejects and destroys them.

From an historical standpoint, *Sunshine* offers a refreshingly honest interpretation of modern Hungarian society. The first chapter is able to effectively capture the mood of decay in the multi-ethnic Hapsburg Empire and the political polarization during the period of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the subsequent counter-revolution of Admiral Miklos Horthy. The film's treatment of the two great totalitarian movements to preside over Hungary during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fascism and Soviet-style communism, are also well represented. In particular, the film's handling of Hungarian complacency in the Holocaust was extremely accurate. During the Second World War, Hungarian authorities did not only assist the Germans in deporting Jews to the death camps but were active participants in the process. Indeed, the concentration camp where Adam and the young Ivan are interned is staffed entirely by native Hungarian fascists.

Cinematically the film must also be commended for its extremely high production values. The cinematography is excellent and the art direction gives the audience a good sense of time and place. Szabo's decision to utilize the landmarks in Budapest's old city was a stroke of pure genius. Veteran film composer Maurice Jarre, probably best

known for his work on *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*, provides the film with an appropriately epic score. The quality of the acting is quite good, although the film's massive chronological scope gets in the way of any deep character development. Fiennes offers his usual quality performance, as does Jennifer Ehle and Rachel Weisz in supporting roles. Trevor Peacock's characterization of the AVO {Hungary's equivalent of the Soviet KGB} chief Gen. Kope, is an excellent example of the archetypical Stalinist.

*Sunshine* is one of the better historical dramas dealing exclusively with modern Central Europe. The film is able to effectively portray the events and forces that have shaped 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary and benefits from some excellent production values. Although some of the characters are underdeveloped and its sweeping chronological scope occasionally glosses over certain events, these are relatively minor flaws in an otherwise quality production. In conclusion, *Sunshine* is an absolute must see for all those interested in modern Central and Eastern Europe, Jewish History, and Holocaust Studies.

Director: Istvan Szabo  
Runtime: 181 min  
Germany/ Hungary