Ervin Galantay recently spoke in support of a film of his opus magnus, at Pushkin House, London.

This 2006 review of the book "Boy soldiers" by Charles Dick is as relevant as ever

Although sixty years have passed since the end of the Second World War, the stream of wartime diaries and memoirs of the more humble participants shows no sign of drying up. To those who conscientiously plough through the material in the hope of finding some new insight, this sometimes seems a pity. The ordinary stories of ordinary people are, alas, usually of limited interest and not redeemed by fine writing. However, every so often, a book like "Boy Soldier" comes along to encourage perseverance.

Ervin Galantay was a fourteen year old junior cadet in the Royal Hungarian Army's military school at Köszeg when, in early October 1944, the Red Army debouched onto the great Hungarian plain. The callow youth that gazes seriously out of the photograph adorning the books' cover was, like many another, anxious to participate in the great adventure called war. "If only the war could last long enough for me to get a taste", he thought – and then, betraying more child-like concerns, went off to feed carrots to a pet doe. His other adolescent preoccupation was, of course, with losing his virginity. On at least the former count, he need not have feared: He would have more than his fill of combat in some of the war's bitterest fighting. The experience is described vividly and with disarming candour (and lack of political correctness) in his diary, fleshed out with memories indelibly seared into his brain.

The sinister and fearful atmosphere of Budapest in the wake of the fascist, Arrow Cross's German-assisted coup and before the arrival of the Soviets is captured in Galantay's dimly comprehended descriptions. Desperate for action, he attempted to join the Arrow Cross militia, much to the horrors of his patrician family. Then he found a better billet in the Vannay Battalion, a scratch force formed from patriotic volunteers even as the enemy closed on the capital. The formation, equipping and training for urban combat of this unit – all highly irregular – provides fascinating reading for regular soldiers trying to understand the improvised militias that are such a prevalent feature of the contemporary military scene. While the three to six week training given to the men was plainly insufficient to create a fully capable battalion, Vannay nevertheless welded together a resilient unit that proved able to conduct a dogged defence and local counter-attacks. His inspired leadership and innovative organisation and tactics were so effective that the unit was to be pushed back only 900 metres in six weeks of often hard fighting.

Less familiar to British readers than the sieges of Stalingrad or Leningrad, or the storming of

Berlin, the 102 day-long ordeal of Budapest was every bit as traumatic. Ervin Galantay brilliantly evokes the confusion and the paranoia, the arbitrary 'justice' meted out to presumed deserters and looters, the gallantry and the suffering, civilian as well as military, the hopes of relief so cruelly shattered, and the final annihilation of his battalion in a doomed break-out attempt. The realities of war, so far from his dreams of glory, are brought to life all the more effectively for the lack of purple prose. Many images will stay with the reader: the piling of frozen corpses, steel helmet towards the enemy, to make a parapet ("the comradeship of the living and the dead"); the stuffing of brandy soaked rags into the mouths of the wounded to stifle their cries; the fearful women and children, cowering in the dark helplessly to await the inevitable arrival of the enemy and their awful fate.

Galantay's account is not merely descriptive, however. With the aid of several good maps, he goes into tactical detail. From the use of armour, through infiltration via the sewers to ambushes and house clearing, his story has much to teach the contemporary soldier about the conduct of fighting in built-up areas. For instance, his battalion's counter-attach on 20th January is hardly by the textbook, but illustrates what a commander's fertile imagination and determined troops can achieve.

"Boy Soldier" is, in short, a remarkably vivid and detailed account of battle and life in a city under siege and then storm. It can be recommended unreservedly to those who seek to understand urban combat - and to those who strive to understand the psychology of fighters who are determined to resist the occupation of their country by a hated and feared foreign adversary.

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Article in the British Army Review, No.139, April 2006.