

The Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

**Fabricating Authenticity: 1919 and the Hungarian  
Communists between 1949 and 1959**

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The subject of this work is the labyrinthine historical memory of First Hungarian Soviet Republic that lasted precisely 133 days in the Spring and Summer of 1919. This particular historical event grew from a relatively isolated particle of the history of the Hungarian communist movement into the most highly praised national celebration between the years of the 30<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 1949 and 1959. These ten years, however, marked not only the rapid accumulation of historical knowledge, but rather a radical break and re-formation of communist power in Hungary that was demanded by the challenge of the October revolution in 1956. The transformation of the historical appraisal of the first Hungarian commune was inseparable from the role 1919 played in the communist re-vision of 1956.

The history of 1919 became the crucial and decisive factor in transforming the anti-Stalinist insurrection in October 1956 into a genuine counter-revolution in communist terms. For communists the most shocking occurrence of 1956 was the siege of the Budapest party headquarters in Republic-square where the insurgents mercilessly massacred the captured defenders. Communist interpreters found the essence of the event in this violence: for them the real purpose of the revolutionaries was to persecute and eliminate all the communists. For them the day of the siege, 30 October, showed the real face of counterrevolution. Party leaders 'discovered' that the radical right wing had directed the occurrences. Communists realized that these radicals had been present from the very beginning of the rebellion. In fact, they had organized the movement and after the occupation of the party headquarters they openly called for the restoration of capitalist dictatorship and the extermination of the defenders of the communist

regime.<sup>1</sup> The conclusion that the massacre of communists had to be interpreted as a sign of counterrevolution was confirmed by the fall of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic. Commandos from the officer corps who called themselves counter-revolutionaries aimed at the restoration of the pre-1914 social and political system. They persecuted, tortured and executed communists, leftist persons and Jews. For party leaders the two events were strikingly similar. In the communist perspective the revolution in 1956 was none other than but the second edition of the white terror in 1919, and October 1956 experienced the second coming of the counterrevolutionaries of 1919.

In as much as it could provide legitimacy for the communist rule, this historical construction aimed at the destruction of the party's adversaries: the participants in and heirs to the revolution. The purpose of this particular narrative was to destroy the self-esteem and identity of the revolutionaries by proving that in reality they had not been fighting for freedom, democracy, national pride or social justice, but only for the restoration of capitalist or fascist oppression, and therefore wanted to kill communists and other decent people. Through this interpretation it was pronounced that the revolution was not the legacy of democrats, of those believing in the ideas of independence, freedom and social justice, but exclusively that of the white terror. The practice of communist historians thereby adjusted itself to the long tradition of a peculiar historical genre: counter-history writing. This mode of constructing histories has only one

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<sup>1</sup> The basic book of this representation is Ervin Hollós – Vera Lajtai, *Köztársaság tér 1956* (Budapest, 1974) A standard communist interpretation of 1956 is János Berecz, *Ellenforradalom tollal es fegyverrel. 1956* (Budapest, 1969), although this book provides a somewhat different perspective and presents the revolution of 1956 as a manouever of Western imperialism. In English translation it is *1956 Counter-Revolution in Hungary: Words and Weapons* (Budapest, 1986)

definite aim: to deprive the target group of its self-identity. The example of the ancient Egyptian author, Manetho illustrates this practice well. Manetho wrote the history of the Jewish people based upon its authentic source, the Bible. Nonetheless, the author precisely inverted the statements of the Old Testament in order to prove that the Jews were not an ancient people with venerable institutions, but simply a herd of lepers who copied the institutions of Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, the communist revision of 1956 was very similar to the practice that is called, in connection with the Holocaust, historical 'revisionism'. 'Revisionists' intend to re-interpret the history of the Nazi genocide and claim the discovery that there was no extermination at all. Their arguments are regularly based upon two forms of denial. First, that the extermination would have been senseless to carry out since no one could have obtained material profit from the executions. Second, since there are no witnesses who experienced the gas chambers from the inside (as all of them died), the existing evidence is doubtful. Therefore, these authors deny the fact of the genocide and the existence of gas chambers. They claim that the final solution meant only the expulsion of Jews from the east, that death happened in 'natural' ways in the camps, and that the genocide was only the invention of Allied propaganda. These statements are definitely capable of the deprivation of a community of its memory. All these rhetorical and narrative strategies attempt to destroy the identity of Holocaust survivors: of Jews, Roma and all the other groups who were the victims of Nazi murderous practice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Amos Funkenstein, 'History, Counterhistory, and Narrative' in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed.: Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA – London, 1992), pp. 66-81

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory* (New York, 1992)

Nonetheless, there is a crucial difference between Holocaust deniers and communist attempts to describe the occurrences of October 1956. The publications of 'revisionists' are not based on any mode of factual re-writing: they are, in fact, a clear case of lie. These narratives have lost all connection with reality or the real. Revisionism represents no historical school, no type of historical discourse, but instead the pure and simple suppression of the historical object under study.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, communist interpreters of history put tremendous effort on building their representations upon the real remnants of the past. These narratives were born during the attempt to understand the traces left behind by history. Deniers of the Nazi genocide aspired to erase the existence of physical sources and, therefore, raised their interpretations over the deep hollowness of non-existence. By contrast, communist descriptions of the past were constructed over real atrocities and corpses, actual persons and documents. Theirs was a more perilous way of distorting truth than historical revisionism. Since communist historians – from a purely formalistic point of view – followed the genuine historical method of the selection of appropriate sources, the construction of a series of events and relationships among them, it was difficult to see what was going on. It was difficult to realize that the apparently true historical narrative concealed all contradictory sources without openly denying their existence. The party leadership caused the memory of the revolution to be forgotten without the aggressive denial of its occurrence. Communist intellectuals could demonstrate the continuing struggle between the eternal forces of Revolution and Counterrevolution, between Communism

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'The Shoah's Challenge to History' in his *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present* (New York, 1996), p. 146.

and Anti-Communism throughout modern Hungarian history through the presentation of physical historical sources: dead bodies, living persons or textual and photographic records.

The purpose of this thesis is to map out the genesis of the representation of this specific historical continuity. It is important to notice that the extraordinary central position of the 1919 communist system in historical continuity was predominantly a phenomenon of the period after 1956. In fact, the event of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic did not play any significant role in the construction of the historical process that crystallized around the connection of 1848, the democratic revolution, and 1948, the foundation of the people's democracy.

The chapters of the dissertation analyse the genesis of the connection of 1919 and 1956, and the transformations of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic according to this relationship. Various parts of the work demonstrate that the coming into existence of historical construction was embedded to a large extent in the weird attempt to appraise the traces of what the past had left behind. The problem of history producers was how to bring abstract historical interpretations closer to the audience. Their concern was how to make these narratives tangible, authentic and convincing enough to persuade the observer to give up his or her critical distance. The work identifies four possible techniques of closing the distance: through claiming the physical identity of abstract ideas, by presenting real individual lives, by the organization of corpses and, as the historical method proper, through the selection and ordering of historical sources. Thus, the second chapter investigates the emerging historical connection between the 'counterrevolutions' of 1919

and 1956 and its relationship with the effort to understand the possibility of the resurrection of the counterrevolution, as communists saw it. The third one, then, is a flashback to point out an important aspect of the genesis of the analysed historical continuity in the trials of war criminals that followed World War II. These legal procedures staged real persons whose actual lives demonstrated the continuity of counterrevolution from 1919 until 1944, the German occupation and the take-over of the Hungarian fascist movement. The fourth section provides an analysis of the most monumental commemorative construction of the communist era, that of the Pantheon of the Labour Movement. The memorial itself constructed a peculiar representation of history similar to the medieval notion of the mystical body that played a crucial role in the self-construction of the party. Thereby the comprehension of historical continuity was crystallized around concrete material corpses. The final chapter closes the investigation with a profound examination of the characteristics of communist historiography in order to establish its generic tradition as well as its foundation upon and relationship with real records.

In between the end of the war and the thirtieth anniversary Hungarian society barely met the memory of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Its anniversaries were not celebrated, its actors were not commemorated and no historical study was born. The First Hungarian Soviet Republic meant no tradition to be continued for the new regime that defined itself a democratic republic, whereas the radical left-wing that also presented itself a part and supporter of this republic distanced itself from the political goals of the dictatorship of the proletariat as well as from the promoters of its resurrection. The theoretical reasoning for

this statement was provided by József Révai, chief communist ideologue, who pronounced that whereas in 1919 it had been correct due to the revolutionary situation to create the dictatorship of the proletariat against the bourgeois republic, it would prove itself an error in 1945 since the democratic republic did not provide shelter for the bourgeois reaction, but rather it was based upon the democratic alliance of workers and peasants.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, whereas the democratic republic of 1918 was an independent topic of party seminars, the First Hungarian Soviet Republic was referred only in a vague political-historical context and was not on the agenda as an individual question.<sup>6</sup>

The politics of East-Central European communist parties were principally transformed after their meeting in Poland on 22 September 1947 when they decided to found the Cominform. The new organ was basically the mean of Soviet control in East-Central European communist politics and was required by the growing tension among the anti-Fascist powers and the beginnings of the Cold War. The Soviet leadership decided to urge its allies to increase their dominance over home politics and to radicalize their demand for power. That meant the end of the

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<sup>5</sup> József Révai, 'Miért harcol a kommunista párt a független, szabad, demokratikus Magyarorszáért?' (Why is the communist party fighting for the independent, free, democratic Hungary?) Hungarian Communist Party seminar leaflet 1 (Budapest, 1945)

<sup>6</sup> László Réti, 'Pártunk harca a fasizmus és a reakció ellen' (The Fight of Our Party against Fascism and Reaction), (Budapest, 1945) Erzsébet Andics, 'Az 1918-as magyar polgári demokratikus forradalom' (The Hungarian Bourgeois Democratic Revolution in 1918) Lecture in the Central Party School. Manuscript (30 June 1945) 'A Magyar Kommunisták Pártjának harca a fasizmus és a reakció ellen' (The 25 Years Struggle of the Hungarian Communist Party against Fascism and Reaction), Lecture for Beginner Courses. Guide, (Budapest, 1946) Mátyás Rákosi, 'A magyar munkásmozgalom és a Kommunisták Pártjának története 1914-től 1935-ig' (The History of the Hungarian Labour Movement and the Communist Party from 1914 until 1935) Lecture in the Central Party School. Manuscript (22 May 1946) András Siklós, *Az 1918-1919. évi magyarországi forradalmak* (The Revolutions in Hungary in the years 1918 and



various people's fronts and coalition governments. The Soviet leaders clarified for their East-central European counterparts that their former policy of co-operation with different peasant parties had failed and they misunderstood the role of people's democracies. For these, according to Stalin himself, ceased to serve the purpose of communist participation in the various governments, but had the functions of genuine dictatorships of the proletariat. The ideological instruction, obviously, conveyed very practical political message: it was time to transform coalitions into one-party dictatorships.

Albeit the party's daily declared openly the First Hungarian Soviet Republic a dictatorship of the proletariat first in 1948,<sup>7</sup> the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Hungarian dictatorship of the proletariat meant the real opportunity for Hungarian communists to testify that their own system equalled the criteria, as well. The comparison of the two periods made it possible to argue on the basis of empirical evidence that the Hungarian people's democracy exercised the function of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This aim, however, resulted in that communist historians and ideologists looked for those features of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic that were commensurable to those of the newer communist regime. Remembering the First Hungarian Soviet Republic was possible and necessary in regards of that, 'we pursue the same fight we began then and our people's democracy basically has the same function what the Hungarian Soviet Republic had: the function of the dictatorship of the proletariat constructing socialism.'<sup>8</sup>

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1919) (Budapest, 1964), pp. 173-7. provides relatively useful bibliographic data on the period in question.

<sup>7</sup> 'A magyar kömmün emlékére', *Szabad Nép* (21 March, 1948)

<sup>8</sup> *Szabad Nép* (22 March, 1949)

It is obvious even after the first reading that the primary aim of the author was to establish a connection between the historical event of the dictatorship of the proletariat in 1919 and the current communist system. It is also apparent in the text, however, that this relationship lacked the elements of descent. The first Hungarian commune did not appear as the cause or antecedents of the party-state born from the people's democracy. The narratives did not reveal the continuous story of historical origins and unravelling. The historians' conclusions represented the First Soviet Republic the pre-figuration of the currently reigning communist system. They regarded the first Soviet regime the *praefiguratio* of the communist state that was experienced as fulfilment, in which the characteristics of communism had already appeared, however only in premature and underdeveloped form and in no sense in a fulfilled way. Thus, the First Hungarian Soviet Republic, 'in its brief existence acted according to the function and vocation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and according to what our people's democracy having the function of the dictatorship of the proletariat creates in incommensurable inner and outer conditions, by the direction of incommensurably more developed and mature communist party, by the leadership of incommensurably more experienced communists.'<sup>9</sup>

It is very likely that after the revolution in 1956 the events of 1919 was evoked for the first time by the new communist regime by publishing a letter sent to the government by an old worker in the 21 November issue of the official daily. The author of the letter first gave an account of his life spent within the labour movement from 1917. The worker wrote

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<sup>9</sup> László Réti, *A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság* (The First Hungarian Soviet Republic) (Budapest, 1949), p. 25.

about his sufferings and privation during the previous regime then re-collected the happy years followed the end of the war. The author then condemned the former communist leadership for distancing itself from the workers and their real life. He concluded that although the behaviour of the party elite contributed to the outburst of the rightful discontent this was very soon appropriated by the 'bloody counterrevolution'. Therefore the old worker called the attention of their comrades to the peril, 'Remember the bloody and cruel counterrevolution of 1919. Remember how many thousands and thousands of our innocent fellow workers and comrades met their death as martyrs, how many widows and orphans mourned their breadwinners and over long years how madly we were persecuted. Wake up, get on your feet again and defend the socialist power of the workers.'<sup>10</sup>

Communist interpreters who experienced an extraordinary violent anti-Communist attack were shocked by the perceived cruelty of the assaults. Thus it was logical for them that the uprising which was originally supported by a considerable proportion of them eventually aspired to destroy the dictatorship of the proletariat through a systematic elimination of the party. In an attempt to comprehend the terrible events those were connected to a more thoroughly understood violence. The horrors of 1956 reminded them to those of 1919: the massacre at the Republic square called 'the counterrevolutionary persecution similar to the white terror of 1919'.<sup>11</sup>

By the first anniversary of the siege of the Budapest party headquarters the uprising in 1956 became the 'second coming' or 'second

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<sup>10</sup> *Népszabadság* (21 November, 1956), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Fehér Könyv* (White Book), issued by the Information Bureau of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary (Budapest, 1956) Vol. 1 p. 22.

edition' of the white terror or counterrevolution in 1919. In addition, the anti-Communist atrocities at the Republic square which before Mihály Francia Kiss's trial were served as evidence for the counterrevolutionary character of the events, turned into signs of a complex historical process. For communists the siege provided an access to the meaning of history, 'Our predecessors have been facing with the predecessors of the guns at Republic square since the beginning of the century: the volley of the gendarmes which had been fired onto demonstrating workers by the Kaiser and König and later by Horthy's armed force *was the close relative of the thundering guns by the siege of the party headquarters.*'<sup>12</sup> History was seen as a continuing struggle between the rebellious people and its oppressors, 'Four hundred years ago the lords burnt György Dózsa (leader of the greatest peasant revolt in medieval Hungary in 1514) on a fiery throne and impaled his fellows. The ruling classes took revenge on every movement of the peasantry later on with similar ruthlessness. In 1919 after the fall of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic the capitalists and landlords paid with cruelty never seen before for the few months of loss of their power. The lords' same fury raged in October 1956, as well...'<sup>13</sup> The roof of the party headquarters at Republic square, thus, gained particular significance: it became an altitude from where the direction and the starting point of history were perceived. 1919 was interesting as the starting point of a long-lasting fight and historical process ended in 1956. This concept of history determined the true significance of 1919: in order to establish the perception of the historical struggle between revolution and counterrevolution the history of 1919

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<sup>12</sup> *Népakarat* (30 October, 1957) See also *Magyar Nemzet* (31 October, 1957) and *Népszabadság* (30 October, 1957)

<sup>13</sup> *Magyar Nemzet* (30 October, 1957)

was required to create their genesis.

In his ceremonial speech for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation of the First Hungarian Republic, Ferenc Münnich, a leading communist figure who had also participated in the First Soviet regime, interpreted modern Hungarian history as a continuous struggle of revolution and counterrevolution. The party leader conceived the revolution of 1848 the definitive starting point of the process leading up to 1919. He called attention to the fact that since the revolution of 1848 had not solved all the problems of social progress, revolution remained an issue of Hungarian politics. However, in 1919 the appropriate revolutionary measure was not to form a capitalistic bourgeois society as it could be in 1848, but to destroy capitalism in favour of socialism. The proclamation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, hence became the true action of the revolutionary movement, and its leader, the communist party, was the legitimate representative of progress.

Communist interpreters conceived the First Hungarian Soviet Republic an event that revealed the unbroken continuity of modern Hungarian history. The revolution in 1919 was meant to be an axis-event around which the happenings of history rolled and to which the chronological series could bound back and forth in time. Preceding events could be connected to the history of the first proletarian regime as a sort of pre-history, whereas succeeding occurrences directly led up to 1956 which, in turn, originated from 1919. 1919 thereby was conceived simultaneously a beginning and also a fulfilment. The revolutionary workers' state fulfilled the aspirations of the nineteenth century labour movement and at the same time generated an expectation for the second and final coming of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

On 23 January 1959 the leadership had already stressed that the Pantheon of the Labour Movement would be unveiled on 21 March 1959, on the fortieth anniversary of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic. The document called attention to the fact that the ceremony had to be treated as one of the events of the anniversary; the inauguration was to be published in the press and to be included within the documentary that recorded the celebration of the fortieth anniversary.<sup>14</sup> The firm connection of the anniversary of 1919 that revealed the meaning of the modern history of the Hungarian communist movement with the Pantheon of the Labour Movement was not accidental. For the communists, the historical process that was crystallized around 1919 had become palpable by the sepulchre and monument. By the Pantheon and the surrounding Kerepesi-cemetery the continuity of the Hungarian past could be experienced and relived by the party. For the Pantheon of the Labour Movement organized spatially other tombs around itself within the Kerepesi cemetery. Communists actually conceived the Pantheon together with its historical environment. Sándor Szerényi's guidebook to the mausoleum believed in the necessity of incorporating the sepulchre in the wider context of the cemetery. He called the attention to the graves of other outstanding persons of Hungarian history like Kossuth, Táncsics, and Károlyi apart from the communist ones. The photos of the brief book also included the tombs of these men together with images of the Pantheon.<sup>15</sup>

Starting from 1959, the fortieth anniversary of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, numerous narrative representations on the

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<sup>14</sup> Magyar Országos Levéltár (National Archives of Hungary) 288/21/1959/6

<sup>15</sup> Sándor Szerényi, *Ismertető a Mező Imre úti temető Munkásmozgalmi Panteonjáról* (A Guide to the Pantheon of the Workers' Movement in the Cemetery at Imre Mező street) (Budapest, 1977), p. 11.

history of the first Hungarian communist state appeared in various richness of form and style. At that time the memory of the soviet system began to dominate the public discourse on the past. Novels, scholarly publications and works of art were issued to the degree never experienced before. Only in the year of the anniversary ten memoirs, twelve collections of documents, twenty-five books concerning regional and local history, ten monographs on questions of detail, eight greater official pieces of appreciation, two books providing an overall view, approximately five fictions and hundreds of studies and minor articles came to the light.<sup>16</sup>

It is obvious that the glory of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic was inseparable from its tragic destiny: the history of the soviet regime was glorious to the extent as it was tragic. For communist observers the history of the dictatorship of the proletariat could be comprehended from the point of view of its horrific downfall. It is also apparent, however, that the fall of the first dictatorship of the proletariat as a conclusion that prescribed the meaning of its historical representation was born due to a specific political point of view in the present, namely the communist experience of the counterrevolution in 1956. The perspective of 1956 provided precisely a tragic end for the history of 1919. Communists saw their present determined by the conflict of revolution and counterrevolution. Historians, hence, began to search the historical origins of this struggle. They discovered its archetypal event in the history of the First Soviet Hungarian Republic. This form of historical representation incorporated these documents into a comprehensive and comprehensible

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<sup>16</sup> András Siklós, *Az 1918-1919. évi magyarországi forradalmak* (The Revolutions of Hungary in 1918-1919) (Budapest, 1964), pp. 186-90.

narrative. Statements of the coherently organized narrative were proved by original historical documents. This fact rendered it authentic and loaded the interpretation with persuasive power. In spite of its coherent connection with the real or definitely due to it, this was a false representation of the past. The mendacious political perspective of the present – that is to say that the uprising of 1956 had been a counterrevolution – did not make it possible to raise a question that could report on *all* the available sources. The plot of triumph and downfall reported the heroic struggle for the liberation of the working class and the sorrowful suffering of communist fighters. These coherent and authentic life-narratives successfully covered and concealed the fact that the same communist fighters directly or indirectly contributed to the sufferings of those people who meant objections and obstructions for their program of political and social transformation. Therefore, the historical narrative failed to account for and incorporate those sources that gave voice for the victims of the Red Terror.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Communist terror troops executed a few hundred people for 'counterrevolutionary' activity. Presently exact details are not available. Gosztonyi, Péter, *A magyar Golgota* (Budapest, 1993), pp. 24-30.