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The Price of Illusion and the Power of Meaning: Helsinki, Hungary, and the Holy Crown

Summary

Whereas the Helsinki Final Act's impact in the Soviet bloc is usually defined by the resistance and pressure inspired by 'basket three' human rights clauses, the part of the accord that the Soviet Union desired was at least as significant, especially for Hungary. The Soviets presumed that formal Western acknowledgement of the post-war settlement – a long-term foreign policy – would ensure its permanence. But the acceptance of post-war borders actually imperilled Soviet control in Central and Eastern Europe because it accentuated the contradiction between the *de facto* subjugation of independent states in the region and their *de jure* independence, while enshrining the latter, thereby strengthening the hands of those within these states who wished to extend and expand their independence from Moscow, economically and culturally. A key example and test case of this process was the fate of Hungary's Holy Crown, which had been in American custody. Employing both primary sources and secondary texts, this new analysis contends that it was precisely what the Soviets had hoped for in a European Security Conference that proved most damaging to control of its sphere of influence, and that, in Hungary, the return of the Holy Crown represented exactly the goal of restored sovereignty that Helsinki endorsed, despite Soviet intentions to the contrary.

Keywords: Helsinki, Helsinki Final Act, Hungary, Holy Crown, Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction

The cost of an illusion cannot be gauged until it is affirmed by others. Especially since the tide of the Second World War's European theatre had turned against Germany, the Soviet Union began to establish coercive control over the lands of Eastern and Central Europe. And even as the Soviets consolidated that domination in the post-war world, they insisted that no such coercive control existed. Hypocrisy of this kind is, of course, not unusual. In the 1941 Atlantic Charter that would come to publicly define British and American war aims, Churchill and Roosevelt claimed that "they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live" – an abstraction that would continue to be primarily honoured in the breach of it. But we would be wrong to view the post-war Soviet public stance vis-à-vis Europe as mere deception. In fact, it established a corrosive contradiction that was never more dangerous to its authors then when it was accepted.

This contradiction between rhetoric and reality rested partly on that Anglo-American talk of national self-determination, since, despite beginning its war by dividing up Poland with Germany and invading the Baltic states, the Soviets would hitch the international legitimacy of their eventual war against Hitler to this thin idealism. The Yalta and Potsdam agreements between the three victorious powers gave lip service to those liberal democratic principles of the Atlantic Charter. And this unlikely coalition not only brought the Soviets within the affirmation of ideals in which they had no interest, it also ensured that their initial subjugation of Eastern and Central Europe was aided by the jurisdiction they shared over occupied territory with Britain and the U.S. For example, it was under the authority of the Allied Control Commission that the Soviet authorities stripped Hungary of its remaining industrial and agricultural resources between 1945 and 1947, while forcing the coalition government into repressive actions such as the banning of many Christian associations in 1946 (Kenez, 2006).

Once peace treaties were signed in February 1947 with former Axis allies under Soviet occupation – Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania – the Allied Control Commissions ceased, nominally restoring these countries' independence. But this was precisely the stage at which Soviet policy within its European sphere shifted from the promotion of communist-influenced "people's democracies" to the imposition of nakedly totalitarian communist regimes. From this period, parties that were rivals to the Communists – both within and without coalition governments – were persecuted to the point of destruction. In Hungary, this meant an assault on the Independent Smallholders Party (Független Kisgazdapárt), which nearly 60% of Hungarian voters had supported in the first post-war election. On 25 February 1947, the Smallholders' General Secretary, Béla Kovács, was detained by Soviet authorities on the specious charge of organizing an anti-Soviet terrorist group. While Kovács would remain in prison until the 1956 uprising, another prominent Smallholder, György Donáth, was sentenced to death in April, and, in May, the Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy was bullied into resignation and exile.

Thus while Hungary suffered the depredations of an internationally-authorized Soviet occupation, it retained at least a modicum of political plurality and social lib-

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erty, but its nominal restoration to the community of independent states was accompanied by its decent into total political subordination to Moscow at the hands of a Soviet-directed cadre of Communist Party officials. Likewise across the region, the establishment of one-party communist rule served the consolidation of Soviet control. Had such control been a temporary measure, this gap between *de jure* and *de facto* might have slipped into obscurity. But it was a key element of Soviet geo-political strategy, and, therefore, international recognition of the permanence of the post-war settlement – which most crucially included the division of Germany – became the primary aim of Soviet foreign policy. This, in turn, counter-intuitively tied the maintenance of a façade of Central and Eastern European independence to the Soviet-oriented status quo.[1] They emerged together, and the latter relied on the appearance of the former for its credibility.

It is for this reason that eventual Soviet success in formalizing the permanence of the post-war settlement was dangerous for the maintenance of Soviet hegemony, which it was presumed to have secured. As long as Soviet dominance over Central and Eastern Europe rested merely on the cold hard fact of its continental military power, which none of its former western allies came close to challenging, it could rely on the grudging acceptance of a pragmatic and stable situation. But once brought into the supposed legitimacy and light of international legal and diplomatic recognition – as occurred with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 – the gap between rhetoric and reality relentlessly tore at the post-war settlement because what was being recognized was not the pragmatic actuality of Soviet dominance but the illusory independence of satellite states. With its public illusions confirmed by its enemies, the Soviet Union could now only do one of two things: denude its power by acting in conformity with a theoretical independence, or damage its legitimacy and credibility by contradicting what it had just persuaded the West to affirm.

The Helsinki Process and its motivations

"Rarely has a diplomatic process so illuminated the limitations of human foresight", Henry Kissinger later reflected on the Helsinki discussions and agreement. Soviet calls for a European security conflab, which would become the Helsinki process, had resumed in earnest with the 1966 Bucharest Declaration emerging from the Political Consultative Committee (PCC) of the Warsaw Pact. Even here, the logic of Soviet aims was garbled by the inclusion in the Declaration, at Romanian insistence, of a demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops from European countries. Such a demand had some resonance due to Soviet hopes of using a European security arrangement to exclude the United States from the balance of power on the continent. But this aim also ensured that the declaration was rebuffed by the country both strategically and economically most important to Communist Europe, West Germany, whose government refused to countenance a European Security Conference (ESC) without its American allies. Therefore, the call was renewed by the PCC in March 1969's Budapest Appeal, without excluding the U.S. "The main achievement of the meeting", at which the

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Appeal was issued, according to historian Csaba Békés, "was the acceptance by all parties of the Soviet-Hungarian proposal that there should be no preconditions for the convening of an ESC" (Békés, 2008).

At this point, however, the Nixon administration mostly shared Moscow's perspective that any formal recognition of the post-war settlement at an ESC could only benefit the Soviet Union. Nixon and Kissinger initially regarded the potential talks as, at best, a means of promoting stability, and, at worst, a distraction from the real Cold War diplomatic priority of Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) negotiations. Despite this scepticism, however, the administration also forged an approach to the Soviet sphere that would expose the contradictory Achilles heel in the Soviet drive to solidify the status quo. "Ultimately, a workable system of security embracing all of Europe", Nixon significantly argued in the February 1970 report to Congress on foreign policy, "will require a willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to normalize its own relations with Eastern Europe". What the administration was expecting of the Soviets was also increasingly what it, and in particular the State Department, was seeking to do. As historian László Borhi summarises, "The State Department established three basic principles for the Soviet bloc: each state would be treated as a sovereign entity; the United States would establish permanent economic relations with them; and, finally, they would be integrated into the political affairs of Europe as a whole" (Borhi, 2016, p. 268).

Such an approach was dangerous for the Soviets because it inspired conflicting impulses. Brezhnev, as he proved in 1968, was committed to protecting the internal and external integrity of the Warsaw Pact, particularly where it faced the non-communist world in Central Europe. On the other hand, these communist countries would increasingly rely on trade with the West, and simply could neither afford to shun closer contact with their Western European neighbours nor rebuff every concession that would be demanded in return. Both complementing and complicating this need was that it was not only congruent with the American desire to individualise its relations with Central and Eastern Europe, but also with the new *Ostpolitik* pursued by West Germany under Willy Brandt as foreign minister from 1966, and as chancellor from 1969. But Brezhnev presumed that he could simultaneously match the West German desire to normalize relations, retain Soviet authority in Central and Eastern Europe, and secure the permanent acceptance of the post-war settlement. But none of these elements proved compatible with the others. Furthermore, the crushing of the Prague Spring had accentuated a connected unsustainable dichotomy – national leaders of satellite states relied for their power on Soviet support, which was also the means by which their popular legitimacy was undermined.

Could a European communist state economically rely on the West, while remaining politically subordinate to Moscow? And could the 'borders' of communist Europe be consolidated at the same time as they were increasingly perforated by East-West contact? The Soviets gambled that this was possible precisely because of their high expectations that the same arrangements which secured economic co-operation would settle the territorial issue, and that settling the territorial issue was synonymous with buttressing the political status quo. This in turn relied on their own self-delusional in-

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sistence that it was external pressure, rather than internal dissent, which most threatened their sphere of influence.

The contortions that these aims and assumptions created are well manifested by the fate of Walter Ulbricht. East Germany's hard-line leader had been the most bellicose within the Warsaw Pact during the Prague Spring, advocating an invasion of Czechoslovakia long before Brezhnev was willing to countenance it. One might have thought that his apparent vindication in August 1968 would strengthen his uncompromising position. Nevertheless, exactly two years' later, Brezhnev overrode Ulbricht's objections by signing the Moscow Treaty with West Germany, in which the Soviets accepted that the West Germans would recognize the inviolability but not the unchangeability of Europe's borders, including the intra-German frontier and the Oder-Neisse border with Poland. The Soviets were, in other words, seeking to secure East Germany's existence as an 'independent' state in a way that the state's own leader objected to. Within a year, the Soviets had secured Ulbricht's removal from power (replaced by Erich Honecker), while the Moscow Treaty paved the way for bilateral West German treaties with Poland (December 1970), East Germany (December 1972), and Czechoslovakia (December 1973).

Although West German and American diplomats certainly also overestimated the short-term impregnability of Soviet power within their bloc, they were more alive to the dangers posed to Soviet hegemony by détente, precisely because of the leverage it would provide to further realise the *de jure* independence of Central and Eastern European states. Nixon's Secretary of State, William Rogers, stressed that "the Department of State was prepared to accept the status quo," as historian Stephan Kieninger describes it, "but at the same time it forcefully pleaded for fostering 'national independence and liberalization in the East.' In essence, accepting the status quo should be the first step in the process of overcoming it (Kieninger, 2010, p. 104). For all the opposition that Brandt's *Ostpolitik* inspired from the CDU in Germany, this was also the German chancellor's calculation. West Germany, in Carsten Tessmer's assessment, "sought a modus vivendi on the basis of recognition of the 'existing real situation' in Europe, including Soviet hegemony over the East bloc. But this modus vivendi should also leave open the option of overcoming the status quo. The Soviet Union, in contrast, was interested in legalizing the European status quo" (Tessmer, 2003).

The opportunity for Hungary in détente

The phenomena of so-called liberalization and national independence in Communist Europe were, of course, far from synonymous. Romania, the nation-state which gained American favour by securing more independence from Moscow than any other member of the Warsaw Pact, was also the most brutally repressive regime on the continent. In some ways, the reverse assessment could be made of Hungary. Its national aspirations had been repressed under Soviet hegemony, with both former territories and millions of ethnic Hungarians remaining under the thumb of Romanian, Czechoslovak, Soviet, and Yugoslav regimes. While Ceaușescu trumpeted his ethno-national principles – and implemented them through his genocidal policies

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against the Hungarians of Transylvania – Hungarian nationalism was beyond the pale in Hungary, only to be whispered in certain oppositional and dissident circles. At the same time, the political necessities of a post-1956 communist restoration had enabled Kádár, after the initial persecution of remaining dissent, to establish his domestic legitimacy on the basis of both relative economic vitality and the restraint of excessive repression. Both of these circumstances meant that Hungary had more to gain from American and West German policies of détente than most other communist states, as well as room for manoeuvre.

Indeed, Hungary's primary goals for its bilateral relations with the United States touched on both the economic and the national. Hungary sought Most Favoured Nation (MFN) trade status, which would release U.S.-Hungarian trade from many impediments, while it also advocated for the return of the Hungarian Holy Crown – the most potent symbol of traditional Hungarian sovereignty – which had been in American custody since the finals days of the war.[2] Hungary's struggle to achieve these aims would form a test case of both the wider process of détente, particularly alongside the Helsinki talks that commenced in 1973, and the parallel ability of Central and Eastern European communist states to forge nationally-specific relationships with the West. How would this work? And would the consequences coincide with American, Soviet, and Hungarian motivations?

Before U.S-Hungarian discussions could turn in earnest to these matters, other lingering issues required attention. Firstly, Cardinal Mindszenty's fifteen-year asylum at the American embassy in Budapest came to an end – following lengthy negotiations between the U.S., Hungary, the Vatican, and Mindszenty himself – when he was driven to Vienna on the morning of 28 September, 1971, before being flown to an audience with Pope Paul VI. The noble Cardinal would remain in exile from his beloved homeland until his death four years' later. Secondly, long-outstanding American financial claims on Hungary dating back to both the war and post-war nationalizations, which had retarded Hungary's ability to obtain credit from the U.S., were settled by a March 1973 agreement.[3] The Hungarian government committed to pay $18.9 million in twenty annual instalments of $945,000. Péter Vályi, who led the Hungarian delegation in Washington D.C., attempted to include an American commitment to Hungarian MFN status within the deal, but Kissinger did not wish to see Hungary bypass Romania in that process, and Vályi had to be content with a letter attached to the agreement, in which Rogers stated that "the Government of the United States… agrees to seek authority [to extend MFN status to Hungary] from the Congress".[4]

During both negotiations, as well as the landmark visit of Secretary of State Rogers to Budapest in July 1972, Hungarian officials raised the return of the Holy Crown. "The Hungarians had hoped to get the artefact back after they agreed to sign the claims agreement of 1973", Borhi explains, "and asserted that it was hard to understand what further grounds the United States had for withholding it". But even though Hungary regarded full normalization of American-Hungarian relations as impossible without the Holy Crown's repatriation, the U.S. side consistently claimed that further progress needed to be made before this happened. While this bilateral process continued, the Helsinki talks shifted the diplomatic plates beneath their feet, with the

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Final Act agreed and signed by thirty-five governments, including all member states of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

The Helsinki Final Act and its consequences

Despite Soviet satisfaction at the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975, it has become commonplace to regard it as an unwitting Trojan horse within the Soviet bloc because of the 'basket three' provisions of the Act relating to human rights and civil liberties. The Soviets had viewed these promises as meaningless affirmations of vagaries exchanged for concrete gains. And this certainly proved mistaken. The Act's "human rights principles, human contacts provisions, and follow-up mechanism", Sarah B. Snyder concludes, "spurred an explosion of dissident activity in Eastern Europe, eventually leading to the development of a trans-national network committed to reform in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union". They "offered Soviet and Eastern European opposition figures important leverage in their protests against communist regimes", while, furthermore, bringing political and religious liberties "under the purview of international relations, supplying justification for external observers to question the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries on their human rights practices (Snyder, 2020a, p. 179).

But, as we have suggested, precisely what the Soviet Union did prize Helsinki for was also not the triumph it was presumed to be. Bear in mind that many Western critics vociferously shared Moscow's presumption. President Ford's soon-to-be-challenger for the 1976 Republican nomination, Ronald Reagan, said that the American approval of Helsinki was a "stamp of approval on Russia's enslavement of the captive nations," while the influential former Under-Secretary of State George Ball opined that "it is one thing to refrain from starting World War III over Prague; it is quite another to drink toasts to the division of Europe. On the 1976 campaign trail, Democrat nominee Jimmy Carter described Helsinki as a "tremendous diplomatic victory for Leonid Brezhnev" (Snyder, 2020b, pp. 70–71).

It was not, of course, entirely unreasonable for some Western observers to share the Soviet assumption that affirming the post-war borders of Europe was also a seal of approval upon its political division and situation. There was a recognised connection between diplomatic recognition and international legitimacy. And, in the case of Soviet-dominated European states, there was an understandable sense that the more the post-1945 status quo was acknowledged, the more likely it was to become permanently entrenched. Such a view was also encouraged amongst American politicians by the pressure of Central and Eastern European émigré groups, who often adopted a zero-sum attitude, wherein any recognition of the communist present was a betrayal of the hope for a non-communist future.

But what this missed – and here the promoters of a muscular Western position were entirely in tune with the paranoid obsessions of Soviet foreign policy – was that the primary threat to Soviet and communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe had always been, and would continue to be, from within, not without. Everything the Soviets 'gained' in the Helsinki Final Act's first basket of agreements was predicated on

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the opposite assumption, which encouraged them to perceive achievement in what actually contradicted the means by which they had consistently secured their European sphere of influence.

"The participating States regard as inviolable all one another's frontiers as well as the frontiers of all States in Europe and therefore they will refrain now and in the future from assaulting these frontiers", declared the Final Act. "The participating States will respect the territorial integrity of each of the participating States." Specifically, this meant the repudiation of invasion. Signatories agreed to refrain from actions "against the territorial integrity, political independence or the unity of any participating State, and in particular from any such action constituting a threat or use of force". Therefore, "participating States will likewise refrain from making each other's territory the object of military occupation or other direct or indirect measures of force… No such occupation or acquisition will be recognized as legal." Most comprehensively, the Final Act affirmed that "participating States will refrain from any intervention, direct or indirect, individual or collective, in the internal or external affairs falling within the domestic jurisdiction of another participating State, regardless of their mutual relations".

As Kissinger – who is less sceptical of Helsinki in retrospect – points out in his memoirs, "a pledge of inviolability of frontiers posed a much greater restraint on the power possessing the largest land army… After all, the only [European] borders that had been violated during the Cold War were those of the Soviet Union's neighbors at the hands of the Red Army. The captive nations of Eastern Europe understood this much better than some in the Western democracies." The Final Act committed signatories to "respect each other's right to define and conduct as it wishes its relations with other States in accordance with international law and in the spirit of the present Declaration". But it had also, at West Germany's urging, added that "frontiers can be changed, in accordance with international law, by peaceful means and by agreement". Furthermore, states "also have the right to belong or not to belong to international organizations, to be or not to be a party to bilateral or multilateral treaties including the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance; they also have the right to neutrality". Kissinger understandably argues that "if the clause had any operational meaning, it vitiated the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968, whereby Moscow justified its use of force against Czechoslovakia as a means to maintain the unity of the socialist camp".

No wonder, as Kissinger continues, "The East European satellites were telling [the Ford administration] privately [that] the Final Act would increase Soviet inhibitions against military intervention and thereby enhance their capacity to conduct a national foreign policy" (Kissinger, 2000). And gaining room to forge an independent foreign policy was an essential component of, in general, widening national independence, thereby turning the Soviets' own bluff into reality through their insistence on solidifying the geo-political status quo. Therefore, as Soviet leaders celebrated the fulfilment of a three decade-long policy priority – even publishing the entire Helsinki Final Act in *Pravda* – its satellite states were emboldened, under the aegis of a document that had Moscow's explicit blessing, and with the assistance of U.S. and West German policy, to pursue the greater realisation of their nominal independence.

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In this context, the potential return of the Holy Crown was of particular significance in signalling and representing this widening of national independence within the Soviet bloc; a factor that was almost entirely ignored by the domestic American opposition to a return. That opposition – in parallel with criticism of Helsinki – two-dimensionally judged that the return would be a boost to communist rule and the present Hungarian regime, which, as well as misunderstanding the diplomatic moment, underestimated the potency of the Holy Crown, which had over many centuries frustrated the attempts of specific rulers to co-opt the royal regalia for partisan or self-referentially temporary purposes.[5]

It was just two weeks before the Helsinki Final Act was signed that the Hungarian government made its first official request to the U.S. government for the Holy Crown's repatriation, on the occasion of the new American ambassador, Eugene McAuliffe, presenting his credentials. Then, a few weeks later, McAuliffe sent a telegram to the State Department, urging a systematic review of U.S. policy regarding the Holy Crown, which he called both "the touchstone of relations" between the two countries and "the single important psycho-political issue that concerns all Hungarians everywhere". In a wide-ranging review of the issue, McAuliffe pondered if a return would "enhance measurably nationalistic feelings among the non-communist populace and thus undercut 'proletarian internationalism'".[6]

And, despite his previous dismissiveness toward Helsinki, President Carter put the weight of his administration behind both its logic and the forces it had put in motion. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was especially instrumental in ensuring that the issue of the Holy Crown was dealt with according to the "long-range goal of encouraging greater autonomy, national identity, and Western orientation in Eastern Europe" (Borhi, 2016, p. 301). As Nicholas Andrews, an expert on the region and the Director of the State Department's Office of East European Affairs, argued in a March 1977 memorandum, the "return to the Hungarian people of this paramount symbol of the Hungarian nation and its independence will concretely support our long-range goal of encouraging greater autonomy in Eastern Europe".[7] A month later, McAuliffe wrote to State that the United States had "an interest in seeing Hungary developing into a more independent entity, more responsive than ever to well-being and legitimate self-interest of its people", and, therefore, that the U.S. government should "make a decision now to return the Crown to Hungary". By contrast, retaining the Holy Crown, he continued, "threatens to retard their further development".[8]

This line of argument, firmly represented by Vance, was ultimately persuasive to President Carter, despite the delays secured by the scepticism of his National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Calling the Holy Crown "the paramount symbol of Hungary's nationhood and Western Christian tradition," Vance asserted in a June 1977 memorandum to Carter that "morally and legally it is indefensible to continue to withhold from the Hungarian people their most important symbol of nationhood. Return of this symbol of Hungary's independence and Western, Christian tradition",

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he continued, "will concretely support our long-range goal of encouraging greater autonomy, national identity and Western orientation in Eastern Europe".[9]

Essential to the aim of encouraging independent national expression within Hungary through this policy was the idea emphasized by Vance that the Holy Crown was not being returned to the current regime, but to the Hungarian *people* or *nation*, which are synonymous concepts in Central Europe (where the nation is expressed in the formation of a state, not defined by it). The Hungarian government readily agreed to American suggestions designed to ensure this impression, including the display of the Crown in a public and open place not associated with the regime and the involvement of the Catholic church in its formal reception. Indeed, in early December, two months after Vance had informed the Hungarian Foreign Minister Frigyes Puja (on October 1) that the U.S. government had definitively decided on returning the Holy Crown, Kádár told the new U.S. ambassador, Philip Kaiser, that he, in Kaiser's words, "agreed with the President's emphasis on the fact that the return of the Crown was a people-to-people act. The Hungarians were ready to receive it in this spirit".[10]

But opposition to the return within America,[11] further unleashed after the joint U.S.-Hungarian announcement on 15 December 1977, persisted in regarding the repatriation of the Holy Crown as merely providing legitimacy to the regime (which was of course congruent with the previous U.S. government position). Indeed some within the Carter administration shared this view. But the presence of the Holy Crown in Hungary did not legitimate the current government – particularly in the context of a regime that had repudiated Hungarian tradition and was built on the foundation of an ahistorical republic. Instead, the Crown affirmed the legitimacy and survival of Hungarian sovereignty beyond the reach of temporary setbacks and contemporary contingencies. The Holy Crown could not logically or credibly affirm a regime that made no claims of authority based on Hungary's royal heritage, but it could lend credence to a definition of the Hungarian nation reaching before and beyond its current subjugated situation. In fact Ferenc Nagy, the Prime Minister removed from power by the Communists in 1947, now supported the return, insisting (in Borhi's summary) that "no communist could derive legitimacy from the Holy Crown since it had ceased to have any constitutional significance when the republic was proclaimed in 1946. Moreover, its return would not change the Hungarian people's misgivings toward their government" (Borhi, 2016, p. 310).

In President Carter's view, "the presence of this treasured symbol will serve to strengthen the attachment of the Hungarian people to their Christian origins, to their cultural and historical heritage and above all, their national independence". Naturally, there was no magical effect, and the regime that represented the Hungarian nation as it received back the Holy Crown was still the one built on the betrayal of 1956 and the execution of Imre Nagy; Soviet battalions still besmirched Hungarian territory. And, even as it sought to carve out further Hungarian autonomy from Soviet domination, the Hungarian communist regime could certainly not claim a smooth or untainted connection between itself and the good of the nation, as much as it tried. One could not begrudge any Hungarian unable to countenance a return under such

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circumstances, with Kádár's Politburo confidante György Aczél proclaiming that "the only rightful owner of the crown is the Hungarian people, the *socialist Hungarian nation*" (italics added) (Szerencsés, 2018).

Nevertheless, the Kádár regime's legitimacy had been cobbled together with the assistance of historical silence, not the complex acknowledgement of national (as opposed to proletarian or revolutionary) continuity. Rather than cement any permanent communist ascendency or affirm Soviet hegemony, the Holy Crown's return to Hungarian soil pointed to something that the Communist Party could neither crush nor co-opt. It was also a tangible and meaningful symbol of the slow uncoupling of Hungary from Soviet control – economically, politically, spiritually – which was aided and affirmed by the very Helsinki process and principles with which the Soviets sought to confirm their power.

Increased contact between Hungary and the West – with Hungary gaining American MFN status in July 1978 – was no more able to perpetuate the communist regime than was the return of the Crown. It was Hungary that became the first to widen the perforations in the Iron Curtain into a gaping hole during the summer of 1989, proceeding to end four decades of communist rule over the negotiating table. In July 1990, a few months after the first free elections in Hungary since 1946, parliament voted overwhelmingly to place the image of the Holy Crown at the top of Hungary's national coat of arms. On New Year's Day of 2000, the Crown was transferred from the National Museum, where it had mostly resided since 1978, to Parliament, where it remains to this day. Two decades after the regime change, and nearly a century since the Holy Crown had last adorned a King of Hungary, 55% of Hungarians, in a public opinion poll, chose the Holy Crown (with options open and none suggested in the question) as the object or building which most symbolized Hungary. The second most popular response was the Hungarian tricolour at 17%, and even a plurality of self-identified adherents of the political left selected the Holy Crown (Délmagyar, 2011). We may allow ourselves the gift of hindsight and declare that it was the communist regime which was in a dependent not a defining position – as the fleeting must be before the enduring – when it received the Holy Crown in 1978. "Hundreds of thousands soon came to admire the Holy Crown", Géza Jeszenszky, foreign minister of Hungary from 1990 to 1994, recalls regarding the Crown's return. "Hungarians, falling to their knees in front of it, chastened from the effects of Communist brainwashing, shed the complexes of national inferiority and shame and the disparagement of national inheritance and traditions" (Péter, 2003, pp. 501–502).

Notes

[1] The notable exception to this was Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia which had been annexed to the Soviet Union.

[2] The Holy Crown was in American custody along with other coronation regalia: the orb, sceptre, sword, scabbard, and mantle.

[3] Unintentionally, debts related to flour sales in the 1920s were not included in this agreement: an oversight that was remedied in 1976.

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[4] Hungarian People's Republic Settlement of Claims. March 6, 1973, *U.S. Justice Department*: www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2014/06/25/hungary_ii_as.pdf; Borhi, 2016, pp. 275–78.

[5] Most recently, Ferenc Szálasi was unable to accrue any legitimacy for his puppet government under German occupation, despite taking his oath of office before the Holy Crown in October 1944.

[6] Ambassador Eugene McAuliffe, Telegram 3098. September 24, 1975, www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975BUDAPE03098_b.html.

[7] Memorandum From the Director of the Office of East European Affairs, Department of State (Andrews) to the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Hartman). March 24, 1977, National Archives: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v20/d136.

[8] Telegram from the Embassy in Hungary to the Department of State. April 22, 1977, *National Archives*: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v20/d139.

[9] Memorandum from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter. June 3, 1977, *Carter Library*: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v20/d142.

[10] Telegram from the Embassy in Hungary to the Department of State. December 12, 1977, *National Archives*: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v20/d159.

[11] In one of the most notable acts of opposition, former Vice Presidential nominee and future Presidential nominee, Senator Bob Dole sought an injunction against the decision, which was denied by the U.S. Tenth Circuit court on 31 December, 1977.

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