

PÉTER CSUNDERLIK

MEMORY POLITICS ISSUES IN RELATION TO THE HUNGARIAN SOVIET REPUBLIC (1919)¹

Although the Hungarian Soviet Republic lasted only 133 days, it continues to have an enormous effect on Hungarian history. During the counterrevolutionary Horthy Era the whole episode was depicted as a horror story, for example by Cécile Tormay. In the socialist period, by contrast, during the Rákosi and Kádár dictatorships, the Hungarian Soviet Republic became the most glorious chapter of Hungarian history. Both representations were distorted, as right-wing storytellers emphasized the terror perpetrated by the dictatorship of the proletariat and excluded the other aspects of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, while after 1945 the red terrorists became heroes, and Communist Party historians focused on the commune's social and culture policies, like the opening of baths and theaters for the proletarians and tried to forget the fact that farmers who resisted the changes were executed. Unlike these storytellers, we must put the Hungarian commune back into its historical context. The proclamation of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not a coup d'état carried out by alien, communist agents, as it is represented in the current memory policy of the Orbán government; the Hungarian Soviet Republic was in fact a product of the chaotic and desperate situation in Hungary following the country's defeat in the First World War, when the disappearance of Greater Hungary became a reality. This was also, however, a period when intellectuals agreed that world revolution was on the horizon, and believed that the 20th century would be socialist, just as the 19th century had been capitalist.

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Péter Csunderlik, PhD – historian, assistant professor at Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest) and research fellow at the Institute of Political History (Budapest). Email: csunderlik.peter@btk.elte.hu. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6439-5182>

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On a cloudy day in March 1919, a densely written manifesto addressed “To All!” appeared all over Budapest, the newly independent capital of the Hungarian People’s Republic, which had come into existence after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

The manifesto contained a message from a hitherto unheard-of political body, the Revolutionary Governing Council (RGC). It claimed to speak on behalf of a new political party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyarországi Szocialista Párt, MSZP). This new party had been created the night before through a secret amalgamation of two parties which had been fighting each other during the previous months. One party was the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, MSZDP), which had been the party of the Hungarian Trade Union movement for decades. The other partner in this union was the Communist Party of Hungary (Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja, KMP), which had only been created a few months earlier, enjoyed no representation in the government, possessed rather limited roots within the Hungarian labor movement, and whose leaders had been under arrest until the night before.

This manifesto proclaimed the end of the Hungarian People’s Republic, which had been set up only a few months earlier following the so-called Aster Revolution (“őszirózsás forradalom”) of October 31, 1918 – a highly popular uprising that had declared Hungary’s independence from Austria, put an end to the monarchy and initiated a republican, parliamentary path to democratic governance in Hungary. The manifesto of the Revolutionary Governing Council declared that the Hungarian proletariat had seized control and replaced the People’s Republic by the Republic of Councils: The Hungarian Soviet Republic.²

March 21st 1919, marks the beginning of a revolutionary experiment in Hungary that has been known under a variety of names: the Budapest Commune, the Hungarian Republic of Councils as well as the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Although the Hungarian Soviet Republic lasted only 133 days, it had an enormous effect on Hungarian history.³ Counterrevolutionary

2 The most complete adaptation of the history of the Hungarian Commune to date is HAJDU TIBOR, *A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság* [The Hungarian Soviet Republic] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1969). A shortened version of this work has been published in English: TIBOR HAJDU, *The Hungarian Soviet Republic* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1979).

3 On how the Hungarian Soviet Republic has been remembered: APOR PÉTER, *Az elképzelt köztársaság. A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság utóélete, 1945–1989* [A Visioned Republic: The Afterlife of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, 1945–1989] (Budapest: MTA BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2014). In English: PÉTER APOR, *Fabricating Authenticity in Soviet Hungary: The Afterlife of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in the Age of State*

politicians and intellectuals referred to this period as the low point, the nadir of Hungarian national history. According to the counterrevolutionary Admiral Miklós Horthy, the man who took over the country after the Dictatorship of the Proletariat collapsed on August 1st 1919, the preceding four months were considered the most shameful period in the nation's 1000-year history, a period when Budapest “*dressed up in red rags.*” During the counterrevolutionary Horthy Era, it was portrayed entirely as a horror story, for example in Cécile Tormay's *Bujdosó könyv* [An Outlaw's Diary], published 1920–1921.⁴

According to the official interpretation of the Horthy regime, the rise of left-wing political forces to power in 1918–1919 resulted in no more than anarchy, chaos, and red terror, and the country's resurrection only began under the leadership of Miklós Horthy.⁵ This counterrevolutionary “founding myth” was untrue as it blamed “leftist political forces” for Trianon while in fact these groups were still powerless when the dismemberment of Hungary was decided by the Entente powers. Furthermore, there was no “united left.” The Horthy system created this image of the enemy by assuming that the liberals, the moderate Social Democrats, and the Communists were one and the same. This message was most powerfully formulated by Gyula Szekfű in his work *Három nemzedék* [Three Generations], published in 1920, according to which revolutions and disintegration were caused not by the loss of the First World War but by liberalism, which had weakened the immune system of the nation.⁶

The Monument to the National Martyrs (Nemzeti Vértanúk emlékműve), inaugurated in 1934 on the Square of Martyrs and erected in memory of the “victims” of the revolutions of 1918–1919 and restored by the Orbán regime, also carries these counterrevolutionary messages. One side of the monument shows the figure of Hungária, with the inscription “Martyrs

Socialism (London: Anthem Press, 2015).; CSUNDERLIK PÉTER, A „vörös farsangtól” a „vöröstatárjárásig”. A Tanácsköztársaság a korai Horthy-korszakpamflet- és visszaemlékezés-irodalmában [From the “Red Carnival” to the “Red Invasion”—The Hungarian Soviet Republic in the Pamphlet and Remembrance Literature of the Early Horthy Era] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2019).

4 See CSUNDERLIK, A „vörösfarsangtól” a „vöröstatárjárásig”, 73–75.

5 On the Hungarian right-wing cult of Miklós Horthy, see TURBUCZ DÁVID, *A Horthy-kultusz, 1919–1944* [The Cult of Horthy, 1919–1944] (Budapest: MTA BTK Történettudományi Intézet, 2014).

6 See GERGELY ROMSICS, *The Memory of the Habsburg Empire in German, Austrian, and Hungarian Right-Wing Historiography and Political Thinking, 1918–1941* (Boulder: Co., East European Monographs, 2010), 586–593.

of the Nation 1918–1919” below, while on the other side a muscular man symbolizing “Hungarianness” wrestles with a monster symbolizing “Bolshevism.” The names of the “citizens slaughtered during the proletarian rule” are inscribed on the monument, starting with István Tisza.⁷

However, Count István Tisza was murdered by soldiers returning from the front on October 31st 1918, well over four and a half months before the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Tisza, therefore, was not a victim of the terror of the proletarian dictatorship.⁸ The “Monument to the National Martyrs” extends the period of red terror back to the months of the Károlyi government, thus assuming that the People’s Republic and the Soviet Republic shared a common identity. This supposed linkage was also served by the legend of the “transfer of power,” according to which Mihály Károlyi handed over power to Béla Kun as President of the Republic, when, according to the sources, he did not in fact do so.⁹

Entirely in keeping with the Orbán regime’s memory policy with regard to Horthy and the 1918–1919 revolutions, the restoration of the monument, which was demolished in 1945, highlighted only one aspect of the diverse period of the revolutions, namely political violence. The old topoi of the Horthy regime have been resurrected under the Orbán regime. According to these right-wing topoi, the political and military collapse was caused by the conspiracy of power-seeking leftist groups (the real cause was defeat in the First World War), and these “anti-national forces” were able to take over because they killed István Tisza (who was not actually killed by Mihály Károlyi and the revolutionaries). These topoi suggest that terror raged in the left-wing country (which can be mainly attributed to the brutalizing effects of the First World War) and deny that there was a significant difference between Károlyi’s People’s Republic and the Hungarian Soviet Republic of Béla Kun. They deny that political violence stemmed not only from the left, but also from the right in the form of white terror. What’s more, the monument does not commemorate the victims of white terror. It suggests there was only red terror in Hungary after the First World War.

In contrast to the Horthy Era, in the socialist period the Hungarian Soviet Republic became the most glorious chapter of Hungarian history during

7 PÓTÓ JÁNOS, *Az emlékeztetés helyei. Emlékművek és politika* [Commemorative Sites: Monuments and Politics] (Budapest: Osiris, 2003).

8 See PÖLÖSKEI FERENC, *A rejtélyes Tisza-gyilkosság* [The Mysterious Murder of István Tisza] (Budapest: Helikon, 1988), 100–121.

9 HAJDU TIBOR, *Ki volt Károlyi Mihály?* [Who Was Mihály Károlyi?] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2012), 120–121.



the Rákosi and Kádár dictatorships after 1949. In *Az elképzelt köztársaság* [The Imagined Republic], published in 2014, Péter Apor explored the reception, interpretation and representation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic between 1945 and 1989, focusing on two problems especially. On the one hand, Apor highlighted that, after 1945, far from being a “glorious” chapter in Hungarian history, the commune was rather embarrassing for the communist “homecoming cadres from Moscow.” As a result, the Communists at first refrained from commemorating the anniversary of the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The “malformed” rehabilitation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic started after 1949 (with magnifying the role of Mátyás Rákosi and scapegoating Béla Kun) but building a genuine cult of remembrance around it began only after 1956. Only during the Kádár era did the Hungarian Soviet Republic become a main point of reference in collective memory as the event which preceded the White Terror, described by the holders of power as the precursor of the 1956 “Counterrevolution.” The history of the commune of 1919 and the following “White Terror” were reread and retold from the perspective of the “lessons” of the revolution of 1956 at that time.¹⁰

Right-wing storytellers emphasized the terror perpetrated by the proletarian dictatorship and excluded other aspects of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. However, after 1949, the red terrorists became heroes, and Party historians focused on the social and culture policies of the commune, like the openings of baths and theaters for the proletarians, while also trying to forget the executions of farmers who resisted the changes. In contrast to these storytellers, we need to put the Hungarian commune back into its historical context, as the proclamation of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not a coup d'état orchestrated by alien communist agents, as the current memory politics of the Orbán regime represents it. Why did the Hungarian Soviet Republic come into existence? How could a dictatorship of the proletariat have been proclaimed in a land which had remained a fundamentally semi-feudal agricultural country, despite rapid industrialization during the age of Dualism having resulted in the emergence of an industrial center around Budapest? That ominous manifesto with the title ‘*To All!*’ pretty much told the truth when it stated the following:

“It is the complete collapse of the bourgeoisie and the failure of the earlier coalition governments that has forced Hungary’s workers and

10 APOR, *Az elképzelt köztársaság*, 29–96.

peasants to take this final step. Capitalist production has come to a standstill in our country. From now on, the workers and peasants of Hungary are no longer willing to serve as slaves of finance capital and large landowners. Only socialism and communism can save this country from the anarchy of total collapse. We realize that we are launching this revolution under international circumstances that can only be described as catastrophic. The Paris Peace Conference has decided to place almost the entire territory of our country under military occupation. The Entente treats the current lines of occupation as the country's final post-war borders. Consequently, our capital's access to food and fuel is cut off. Our ability to feed our citizens or to heat our homes is denied. Under these circumstances, we have no other recourse than to give power to the people, to declare the dictatorship of the proletariat, and let the proletariat and our poor agrarian laborers seize power and govern themselves."¹¹

The motivation behind the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and its widespread initial popularity can only be understood through an examination of the period following the First World War. By 1919, most Hungarians were convinced that the catastrophe of the First World War was the death knell of global capitalism and that the only way forward was socialism. This was the view not only of the most influential student organization in Hungary, the atheist-freethinker Galileo Circle (established in 1908),¹² and of theorists of the Hungarian labor movement, but also of many conservative politicians, such as Count Albert Apponyi. It is an empirically verifiable historical fact that socialism was broadly welcomed in Hungary at the end of WWI by the widest spectrum of Hungarian society. Socialism's allure in Hungary was not the monopoly of the working classes

11 See GÁBOR SÁNDORNÉ, HAJDU TIBOR, SZABÓ GIZELLA (szerk.) *A magyar munkásmozgalom történetének válogatott dokumentumai. Hatodik kötet. A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság 1919. március 21.–1919. augusztus 1. Első rész. 1919. március 21. – 1919. június 11.* [Selected Documents of the History of the Hungarian Labor Movement. Volume 6: The Hungarian Soviet Republic. Part 1. March 21st, 1919–11th June 1919.] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1959), 3–4.

12 On the history of the left-wing radical student circle established in 1908, whose first leader was Károly Polányi, and in which Ilona Duczynska later played an important role between 1917–1919 cf. CSUNDERLIK PÉTER, *Radikálisok, szabadgondolkodók, ateisták. A Galilei Kör (1908–1919) története* [Radicals, Freethinkers, Atheists: A History of the Galileo Circle (1908–1919)] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2017). On the life of Károly Polányi cf. GARETH DALE, *Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.7312/dale17608>

or the landless peasantry. Even Count Albert Apponyi – later the leader of the Hungarian counterrevolutionary delegation at the Paris Peace Conference – wrote at the end of 1918: ‘Returning to the old system is out of question. We are part of the great social world revolution, and what we are experiencing is only the local part of this world process’.¹³

This era’s widely embraced socialistic mood explains how world-famous Marxist philosopher György Lukács, son of a millionaire financier, could turn from a bourgeois philosopher who rejected violent means into the chief ideologist of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, and how he would come to openly support the use of violence by the winter of 1918–1919. It was this widespread attraction to socialism at the end of First World War that explains why populist writer Dezső Szabó, darling of the Hungarian Right in the 1930s and 1940s, could serve as a “prophet of Communism” in 1919. We should also not forget bourgeois writer Sándor Márai, a favorite artist of the culture policy of the first Orbán government, who had also been a communist around the age of eighteen, before he became a well-known conservative intellectual.¹⁴

Tamás Kóbor, a liberal-conservative Hungarian writer and one of the supporters of István Tisza, reflected on the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in the following words: “It was a last desperate act of the crew of a steamship that had been swept away, without food or coal, after being confronted with the incompetence of its commanding officers’.¹⁵ Kóbor – who published his diary of 1919 after the fall of the Hungarian Commune under the title *About Bolshevism during Bolshevism* – was right.

The despair in Hungary in 1919 was triggered by the apparent “collapse” of a “bourgeois world” which many had believed to be everlasting and indestructible. The “incompetence of the officers,” to quote Tamás Kóbor, referred to the political chaos and the inability of the ruling political establishment to get the country back on its feet after a disastrous war and in the midst of an enormous socio-economic and military crisis at a time when the historical “Greater Hungary” seemed to be disappearing.

13 LITVÁN GYÖRGY (szerk.), *Károlyi Mihály levelezése. I. kötet. 1905–1920* [The Correspondence of Mihály Károlyi. I. kötet. 1905–1920], (Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1978), 357.

14 See HATOS PÁL, *Az elátkozott köztársaság. Az 1918-as összeomlás és az őszirózsás forradalom története* [The Cursed Revolution: A History of the Collapse and the Aster Revolution of 1918], (Budapest: Jaffa, 2018), 15–17.

15 KÓBOR TAMÁS, *A bolsevismusról a bolsevismus alatt* [About Bolshevism during Bolshevism] (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1919), 52.

To understand the depths of the despair that triggered the Budapest Commune, it is worth reflecting on the dramatic lines of Árpád Tóth, who would later become known as an apolitical impressionist poet. He too was mesmerized by the “Red God” in 1919, and in his poem *Az új Isten* [The New God], written just days after the start of the Commune and published in the journal *Nyugat* [West], he welcomed communism: “From the Red East towards the pale West He bellows, / I have come! / The Red God has arrived.”

Faith in the strength of the “Red God” also explains why even many of the conservative-nationalist army officers of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – the future military elite of the counterrevolutionary Horthy Era – sided with the internationalist Commune at the end of the War. Back in March 1919, many of them were also convinced that the territorial integrity of the bleeding, wounded country that was Hungary could only be protected by a “New God” from “the East.”

Left-wing social democrats, progressive writers, conservative civilians and right-wing military officers were unanimous in their belief that the Soviet-Russian Red Army would help end the violation of Hungary’s territories by the Entente. This single, unshaken belief that the Russian Red Army would countervail the Republic’s humiliating betrayal by “The West” united the left, the right and the center in Hungary in March 1919. Soviet troops would put an end to the vivisection of Hungary, to the unilateral military dismemberment by the Entente realized by neighboring troops from Czechoslovakia, Romania and Serbia and would save the newly formed Republic of Councils from destruction and set the brutalized country on the path to sustainable economic development and social justice.¹⁶

Most citizens of Budapest immediately understood and agreed with the message of the leaflet “*To All!*” issued by the Revolutionary Governing Council on March 21st 1919. They accepted its argument that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was necessitated by the successive failures and incompetence of the “previous coalition government.” Most agreed with its main thesis, namely that the leading politicians of the traditional Hungarian political elites had been discredited, and that “bourgeois politicians” had been unable to deal with the difficult challenges they were

16 HATOS PÁL, *Roszfűk világforradalma. Az 1919-es Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság története* [The Bad Boys’ World Revolution: A History of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919] (Budapest: Jaffa, 2021), 61–62.

faced with after they were catapulted into power by the Aster Revolution in 1918. The collapse of the bourgeois government was inevitable.¹⁷

It is fairly safe to say that if Hungary had not fallen into such a deep abyss in 1919, if the circumstances in which the citizens of this country found themselves had not been as hopeless as they were, the Revolutionary Governing Council would not have been so wholeheartedly embraced by the Hungarian people in the first weeks of the Commune.

It was the intensity of the pain stemming from post-war collapse and the sense of hopelessness in the country that led to the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. It was an unprecedented historical situation (the collapse of the political-economic-social order after the loss of the First World War) that compelled the citizens of Hungary – the proletariat, the landless peasants, tens of thousands of students, artists, intellectuals, displaced war veterans, the bourgeoisie and even segments of the aristocracy and nobility – to try something they had never tried before: they agreed that their only defense against “the total anarchy of collapse” was “socialism-communism.” This was the natural reaction of people driven to the brink. When Fidesz party historians claim that the proclamation of the proletarian dictatorship was only a plot by foreign-funded agents of foreign interests and did not enjoy support within the country, they are depriving us of our past. They want to sell us all a spy novel and pass it off as history.

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