

# LÁSZLÓ GYÖRGY

## THE IDEAS OF THE RULING CLASS (REVIEW)<sup>1</sup>

In 2021, Tamás Krausz published a volume entitled *Historiography and Memory Politics*, a collection of his writings from the last 25 years. This article presents this book, and, through it, reflects on the most important elements of the author's four decades of academic work. The thematically extremely diverse writings, as indicated by the title of the volume, are connected by their focus on memory politics, that is, the examination of how the new regimes established after the fall of state socialism use history for their own purposes. One of the author's most important messages is that scholars of history must never give up their academic autonomy, even if political and other conditions are unfavorable.

*Keywords: memory politics, regime changes, Eastern European history, Marxism, historiography, Holocaust, Second World War*

László György – PhD student in History, Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University. E-mail: gyorgylszl20@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3671-9848>

---

<sup>1</sup> Citation: LÁSZLÓ GYÖRGY, “The Ideas of the Ruling Class (Review)”, *RussianStudiesHu* 5, no. 1 (2023): 225–234. DOI: 10.38210/RUSTUDH.2023.5.10

Few would disagree today that, contrary to all hopes and expectations, the pluralistic bourgeois democratic regimes established in Eastern Europe after 1989 have failed to bring about the impartiality of historians and an interpretation of history that is free of political and ideological agendas. The more than 30 years that have passed since the regime change have made this failure evident, as well as the fact that history did not end with the fall of state socialism and the triumph of “liberal democracies.” It has proven impossible to cleanse social sciences of all ideological-political distortions, as there is always pressure to legitimize power (however “democratic”) and to support its endeavors in relation to memory politics. Rewriting history to suit the needs of the moment is, therefore, a constant problem. (One may add that historiography can never be completely independent of ideology and ideological determinations. Many, in vain, see “de-ideologizing” as the guarantee of an authentic and professional historiography, and try to place themselves in a position that is “superior to history.” However, raw facts and datasets are inescapably interpreted by the researcher from a certain ideological and theoretical-methodological standpoint, which is why, ultimately, “the exploration of reality proves to be inseparable from ideology in the social sciences”.<sup>2</sup>)

This, however, does not mean that the mission of historiography should be limited to pure apologetics. On the contrary, it is essential for this discipline to strive for objectivity, to explore the causes and interests behind events, to collect as much and as diverse historical data as possible, above all by relying on authentic sources and documents, and not least to take a critical approach to demands and claims that come from “outside” of academia. One may say that historiography even has its own means of protecting itself in the methods that have matured over centuries of scholarly advancement.

\*

Tamás Krausz belongs to a school of historiography that is perhaps considered outdated, or at least, less fashionable today—and one that takes the principles outlined above seriously. His latest book of essays, brought out in 2021 as Vol. 49 in the series *Rusziisztikai könyvek* [Books on Russian Studies]<sup>3</sup>, is a collection of his writings from the last quarter of a century (with the exception

---

2 See: ZSIGMOND PÁL PACH, “A társadalomtudományok fejlődésének elvi kérdéseihöz”, in ZSIGMOND PÁL PACH, *Történet szemlélet és történettudomány* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1977), 17–18.

3 TAMÁS KRAUSZ, *Történetírás és emlékezetpolitika* [Historiography and Memory Politics] (Russica Pannonicana: Budapest, 2021).

of one paper originally published in *Történelmi Szemle* [Historical Review] in 1980. This volume touches upon an exceptionally wide range of subjects—it is not even possible to deal with each paper separately in this review—and thus reflects the author’s extensive scholarly interests.

The book consists of two major sections. The first part focuses on decisive moments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that one might call regime changes: 1917, the Stalinist turn, 1945, 1968 and 1989. The second part mainly comprises essays on the war waged by Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union and the Holocaust, and offers a critique of mainstream historiographical narratives such as the theory of totalitarianism. What binds the writings together, and what the title of the volume suggests, is their focus on *memory politics*—a discussion and critique of how the new regimes that emerged after the fall of state socialism have used the past for their own purposes. To put it in more specific terms, the author is interested in how, and especially why, the *Great October Socialist Revolution*, for example, became a *Bolshevik coup* almost overnight; why *socialist democracy* suddenly turned into a *communist dictatorship*; why *liberation* in 1945 started to be seen as *occupation*; how the *heroic Soviet soldier* became a *rapist barbarian from Asia*; and why *anti-fascist heroes* were suddenly considered *terrorists*.

The author’s critique of official memory politics is based on a critique of the prevailing property relations (i.e. power relations), the key to which is provided by Marx and Engels’ almost 180-year-old work, *The German Ideology*: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas [...]”<sup>4</sup>

One of the key mediators of “dominant ideas” today is memory politics, which determines how society should relate to certain issues of the past. This “project” is “successful” if people widely accept the narrative offered, start to use the *topoi* presented by memory politics, and ultimately internalize its logic. The primary aim/function of memory politics, or, one might say, of the state-organized falsification of history, is thus to enforce power relations and the existing social order, or—and this is one of Krausz’s most important

---

4 KARL MARX (with FRIEDRICH ENGELS), *The German Ideology, including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 67.

insights—to discredit any sociopolitical alternative that deviates from the predominant narrative. It is interesting to note that while in previous historical periods, such as the avowedly anti-communist, anti-revolutionary and anti-progressive Horthy era, this was mainly achieved by police-administrative, and often terrorist means, today, it is institutional falsification of the past (through institutions such as the so-called House of Terror, the Institute of Hungarian Studies, or the Committee of National Remembrance, all devoted to conveying biased and highly emotional narratives about Hungarian history), the relativization of basic facts, the discrediting of scholarly perspectives, in short, “intellectual interference” that is used—and for the time being this seems to be a much more effective method. No wonder, then, that in recent years, Krausz has turned his attention to this issue.

The first chapter of the volume focuses on the assessment of state socialism, a question in which the right/far-right and liberal interpretations essentially converge, despite their *seemingly* antagonistic positions. The “cardinal rule”, which is hard to disregard, is that the pseudo-socialist regimes of Eastern Europe are customarily identified as communism, without any distinction. It is also “forbidden” to periodize this era, i.e., it must be interpreted as a homogeneous epoch, always set in parallel with Hitler’s fascist system. This has been, in a way – and this is another fundamental thesis of the author’s<sup>5</sup>—and still is one of the sources of legitimacy of the post-1989 nationalist-liberal regimes in Eastern Europe.

Even after more than three decades, the fall of state socialist regimes is still the subject of lively debate.<sup>6</sup> Several essays in Krausz’s volume contribute to this discussion, and the author’s particular position on this issue is clearly evident. In his review of János Kornai’s textbook entitled *A szocialista rendszer* [The Socialist System], originally published in 1994, he criticizes the liberal, right-wing narratives about the existence and collapse of state socialism. Kornai postulated the economic unviability of socialist systems and the superiority of the market economy; for him, the latter stands for rationality *per se*, while the former represents an irrational utopia. Krausz focuses his critique on the *unhistorical* methodology applied by Kornai (he does not, of course, address questions of economics). He points out that Kornai deduces both the ways of operation and the dysfunctions of the so-called “existing”

---

5 See especially the paper entitled “GULAG és Auschwitz, avagy az összehasonlító elemzés értelme és funkciója” [The GULAG and Auschwitz, or the Meaning and Function of a Comparative Analysis].

6 See, for example, the studies by László Tütő, György Wiener and Péter Szigeti in Vol. 130 of the journal *Eszmélet* (Summer 2020).

(i.e., bureaucratic authoritarian) socialisms directly from the ideas of Marx, Lenin, and other communist theorists, and sees the flaws of the system as the consequences of theoretical shortcomings, rather than linking them to concrete relations of interests and class.

Notably, the eminent economist Kornai presents capitalist private property as a quasi-natural law, the only rational possibility (a “trick” that was already used in Marx’s time), instead of a social formation that emerged *historically* (and will therefore certainly disappear one day). On the other hand, Kornai ignores the fact that, for hundreds of years, capitalism has operated in a hierarchical world system, “in which historically established structural determinations prevail (such as the interrelationships between the center, the semi-periphery and the periphery, the structure of the division of labor, the relations of exclusion and exploitation, unequal exchange and unequal political and power relations, etc.)” (p. 122).

Present-day left-Marxist interpretations of the fall of socialism are also diverse and have their subjective viewpoints. Some argue, broadly speaking, that the development of material productive forces with the capacity to form the basis of a mode of production that would transcend capitalism had not yet reached a sufficient level at the time when these systems emerged (1917, 1945, etc.). Even if so-called *crude communism* were to be created by chance, and in the semi-periphery at that, it would be doomed to failure. According to this interpretation, the socialist system was ultimately overthrown by multinational capital. This needed to expand the world market, and was being hindered by the state socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union. The bloc therefore had to be destroyed. This, in essence, is a viewpoint of economic determinism, in which history is the product of necessities largely independent of human beings.

Tamás Krausz builds his arguments on different theoretical foundations, something which distinguishes the whole volume as well as all his works. The intellectual source of his standpoint can be found on the one hand in the *oeuvre* of Ferenc Tőkei, above all in the Marxist theory of social formations (which the renowned sinologist rediscovered in the ruins of Stalinism from the 1960s onwards, inspired mainly by the *Grundrisse* and *The German Ideology*), and, on the other hand, in the *Ontology* of George Lukács and his small book *Democratisation Today and Tomorrow*, published in 1968. On this basis, in contrast to the “determinists”, Krausz emphasizes the *alternativity* of history, shaped ultimately by people who move between “prevailing, given and inherited” relations and structures, but who are conscious actors nonetheless. The paper “Perestroika and the Change in Property Relations,”

a key text in the volume, takes this as a theoretical starting point. Drawing on original historical sources, Krausz shows that the fall of the Soviet Union was not due to external but internal causes, namely that the state and party apparatus considered their power and privileges to be more secure within the framework of capitalism and bourgeois democracy, and therefore moved towards capitalist restoration rather than the “socialization” of state property during perestroika.<sup>7</sup>

\*

The second chapter of the volume, entitled “Wars and Revolutions: Facts and Analogies,” focuses on the anti-fascist war of the Soviet Union and the Red Army, something which has been the subject of renewed debate in recent years (mostly in connection with round-number anniversaries). These discussions are partly professional and partly serve memory-politics purposes, although it is not always possible to draw a clear line between the two, and in many cases it is professional historians who convey and reproduce certain elements of the *topoi* used in memory politics, who give form to these political products, and who eventually validate them, presenting them as scholarly thought. The latter was particularly clearly demonstrated during the commemorations of the siege of Budapest and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so-called “Breakout” (the allied German and Hungarian troops’ attempt to break out from Budapest after it had been encircled by the Soviet army). One of the intellectual promoters of these commemorations was Krisztián Ungváry, who has long been the Trojan horse of the far right in “bourgeois” historiography (a fact which, unfortunately, very few have noticed so far). It must be noted that Ungváry, both in his academic work and in his public speeches, proclaims the civilizational superiority of Western European (German) culture, over the Soviet Union (Russia) above all, thus sometimes implicitly, sometimes quite openly justifying Germany’s genocidal war against the “barbarian East”.<sup>8</sup>

7 See also: ESZTER BARTHA, „A munkástörténet-írás új perspektívái: Bevezető”, in *Egy másik Kelet-Európa. Munkás- és társadalomtörténeti tanulmányok Mark Pittaway emlékére*, ed. ESZTER BARTHA, TAMÁS BEZSENYI (Budapest: ELTE BTK Kelet-Európa Története Tanszék, 2017), 7–28. and ESZTER BARTHA, “Would you call the capitalists back? Workers and the beginning of market socialism in Hungary”, *Social History* 34, no. 2 (2009): 123–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020902879515>

8 On the controversy around Ungváry, in addition to the paper titled “‘Gentleman’ Invaders and ‘Law-Breaking’ Partisans?” in the reviewed volume, see Gyula Szvák’s short but revealing article entitled “Szilánkok. Vitáink – egymással, egymásért” [Fragments: Our Debates—With and For Each Other], in *Tertium datur. Írások Krausz Tamás 70. születésnapjára*, eds. Gyula SZVÁK, József JUHÁSZ (Budapest: Russica Pannonicana, 2018),

According to Ungváry, one cannot speak of an anti-fascist war waged by the Soviets (as it is only a “Stalinist” myth), not least because, according to the theory of totalitarianism, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were completely alike, and the true victims of the life-and-death struggle between the two were the small nation states of “Central Europe”. It is rarely mentioned, however, that in the interwar period, all these nation states—with the exception of Czechoslovakia—established highly anti-democratic, fascist and authoritarian regimes (led by Horthy, Piłsudski, King Alexander I, etc.), with a policy of anti-Semitism and severe repression of minorities.

One of the key concepts of the commemorations under Ungváry’s ideological guidance was *victimhood*: that is, that there were only victims of the “senseless fight” in the siege of Budapest. However, this attitude obscures real historical processes and causes, and pays no attention to the fact that if there were victims, there must have been perpetrators, too. Nor does this standpoint acknowledge the fact that it was the Red Army that ultimately put an end to the Horthy regime, the terror of Arrow Cross rule and the Nazi occupation, which had brought about an almost total destruction of Hungary—regardless of how one views the social changes in the years following 1945. It is worth pointing out here—and the essay “Stalin and the Perspective of the Soviet Leadership in 1945” in the book provides a great deal of evidence in this respect—that, after the victory, Stalin did not even envisage a communist turn, the “Sovietization” of the newly subjugated Central and Eastern European region: this only became necessary in the next, increasingly escalating phase of the Cold War in 1947.

The essay “Victory—Auschwitz—Memory” demonstrates that the view of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mentioned above, (also) represented by Krisztián Ungváry, is neither a new nor an original Hungarian or Eastern European intellectual product: its main lines were developed during the Cold War in various social science research institutes in the United States. Its best-known theorist on the “international stage” is Timothy Snyder, who is also a regular commentator on contemporary foreign policy issues, putting the rich historical record at the service of US geopolitical interests.<sup>9</sup>

Another characteristic element of the theory of totalitarianism, which Tamás Krausz criticizes in several studies, is the “Auschwitz-GULAG analogy”,

---

especially the subchapter “A retrospektív partizánvadászatról” [On Hunting Partisans in Retrospect], 355–358.

9 See also: DANIEL LAZARE, “Timothy Snyder’s Lies”, *Jacobin*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/timothy-snyders-lies/>

which is supposed to prove that the Soviet Union itself carried out planned and conscious genocide in the 1930s and 1940s, only on a class basis rather than on a racial one. Such a conclusion, however, can only be reached by a severely neglectful and selective use of historical sources, and in many cases by blatant falsification (for example, when POW camps are deliberately confused with the GULAG). The Holocaust cannot be relativized, and not (only) for abstract moral reasons; and if it is relativized, then one must above all suspect motives rooted in memory politics. Nazism, and thus the Holocaust, is a unique phenomenon in world history: a uniqueness which, in broad terms, lies in the fact that *colonialism* and *racism*, deeply rooted in European civilization, turned for the first (and last) time in history against the peoples of Europe, i.e., against itself, with the aim of the *total* (!) extermination of the Jews and the partial extermination of the (Eastern) Slavs.

On the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the debate around the agreement intensified (again), both in Hungarian and international historical scholarship. There is still a tendency to shift the responsibility for starting the Second World War, or at least part of it, to the Stalinist Soviet Union, as well as to minimize the role of the West (above all France and Britain) in unleashing Hitler— what we now call *the policy of appeasement*.

The fact that the EU Parliament, which has no competence in historical matters, adopted a resolution on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War detailing the role of the Pact in paving the way for the Soviet annexation of “independent” nations, is a good indication of the geopolitical dimension of the debate.<sup>10</sup> This EP document, which has subsequently become a major reference point in Hungarian academia and the media, can only be understood in the context of the current global struggle for hegemony, the reshaping of the world system, and the new Cold War (with the West on one side, and China and Russia on the other). The militant anti-Sovietism of the EP declaration is in fact a “message”, a warning to today’s Russia. What we perceive of this in Central-Eastern Europe—most recently, for example, the demolition of the Konyev statue in Prague—is merely a local manifestation of these global trends.

---

<sup>10</sup> This document is available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0097\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0097_EN.html) (European Parliament: Motion for a Resolution on the 80th Anniversary of the Start of the Second World War and the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe, September 17, 2019.)



The 1939 alliance between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the “two dictatorships”, is completely decontextualized in the above interpretation, i.e., it is removed from the historical process, from the conditions under which it was forged. One can mention, for example, the anti-Soviet diplomatic maneuvers of Poland, later seen as one of the first victims of totalitarian dictatorships, or the Munich Agreement, by which France and England, in agreement with fascist Italy, carved up Czechoslovakia and gave Hitler the Sudetenland. The Munich decision is part of the immediate prehistory of the Soviet-German pact, since it was not only clear that Germany was turning eastwards, but also that the Soviet Union, which was not at all prepared for a possible war, was isolated in international politics. This forced it to move quickly (p. 228–229).

\*

Tamás Krausz’s book of essays was written amidst this intellectual turmoil. What he can offer is, on the one hand, a *historical* perspective based on sources and source criticism, drawing on the rich historiographical tradition of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century (György Ránki, Emil Niederhauser, Immanuel Wallerstein, Isaac Deutscher, E. H. Carr and Eric Hobsbawm can be named here as sources of inspiration), and partly, on the subjective and moral side, a *confident anti-fascist attitude* that is nowadays very rare. The latter position, the anti-fascist discourse that prevailed for a time after the Second World War, eventually fell victim to anti-communism and anti-Sovietism—which, in Eastern Europe after the regime change, but especially after the global economic crisis, have become as much a compulsory element of history textbooks and popular literature as vulgar anti-capitalism and anti-Westernism once were in the 1950s.

Perhaps the main lesson, or if you like, the message of Tamás Krausz’s book is that even if the circumstances, the political climate and the institutional and financial conditions are unfavorable, historiography must not give up its own position and autonomy in the face of the memory politics, which operates with unscientific, over-simplified and empty rhetoric.

## References

ESZTER BARTHA, „A munkástörténet-írás új perspektívái: Bevezető” [New Perspectives on the Writing of Labor History: An Introduction], in *Egy másik Kelet-Európa. Munkás- és társadalomtörténeti tanulmányok Mark Pittaway emlékére*, ed. ESZTER BARTHA, TAMÁS BEZSENYI (Budapest, ELTE BTK Kelet-Európa Története Tanszék, 2017), 7–28.

ESZTER BARTHA, “Would you call the capitalists back? Workers and the beginning of market socialism in Hungary”, *Social History* 34, no. 2 (2009): 123–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020902879515>

European Parliament: Motion for a Resolution on the 80th anniversary of the start of the Second World War and the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, September 17, 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0097\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0097_EN.html) (Accessed January 25, 2023).

DANIEL LAZARE, “Timothy Snyder’s Lies”, *Jacobin*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/timothy-snyders-lies/> (Accessed January 25, 2023).

KARL MARX (with FRIEDRICH ENGELS), *The German Ideology, including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 67.

GYULA SZVÁK, “Szilánkok. Vitáink – egymással, egymásért” [Fragments: Our Debates—With and For Each Other], in *Tertium datur. Írások Krausz Tamás 70. születésnapjára*, eds. Gyula Szvák, József JUHÁSZ (Budapest: Russica Pannonicana, 2018), 348–358.

ZSIGMOND PÁL PACH, “A társadalomtudományok fejlődésének elvi kérdéseihez” [On the Theoretical Questions of the Development of Social Sciences], in ZSIGMOND PÁL PACH, *Történetiszemlélet és történettudomány* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1977), 17–18.