

What Made the Kádár Era? Two Books on Hungary's Recent Past
Népuralom ötvenhatban [People's Rule in '56]. By Éva Standeisky.
 Pozsony–Budapest: Kalligram–1956-os Intézet, 2010. 597 pp.
 Bevezetés a kádárizmusba [Introduction to Kádárism]. By János Rainer M.
 Budapest: 1956-os Intézet–L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2011. 352 pp.

Hungary has its own extensive literature on the era of state socialism, with a steady stream of monographs (re)assessing the whole of the period. Previously well-established ideas on the state and society of state socialism have come under review in recent years. The approaches of social and cultural history and the history of mentality are gradually making inroads into the study of recent history in this country. The assessment of the Kádár era has become a question of heightened interest in the last few years. The limits of power, the scope ordinary people had for action (including against the system) and how these shaped the world and everyday life of state socialism are among the fundamental questions of interest on the state socialist system and the Kádár era.

No assessment of the Kádár era can completely dissociate it from 1956 and the period that preceded it, the Stalinist Rákosi era. Books on the events of the 1956 Revolution have proliferated in Hungary since the political transition. Éva Standeisky's *Népuralom ötvenhatban* stands out among these. The author examines the aims that motivated the everyday participants in 1956 and the individual and collective actions which shaped the historical events. She takes a history-of-mentality approach to the events of the Revolution, assembling and interpreting data that has already been published, and focusing on individual cases and local events. Although to a large extent building on previous political-history and local-history treatments, the book examines the mentalities in the background of the events from close up. The scale changes several times from chapter to chapter, progressing from the mass to the group and then to the individual, and giving an insight into the Revolution from a micro-history perspective. These changes in viewpoint in themselves set the book apart from the idealized accounts of the Revolution familiar in general history books and from the image of 1956 constructed in the West.

Foreign accounts of the Revolution were heavily influenced by the work of Hannah Arendt. In the second edition of her book on totalitarianism, Arendt wrote about the workers' councils set up in the Hungarian Revolution. These have been widely interpreted in Western left-wing accounts as repositories of the

revolutionary will (the aims of the “working class”). Several, following Arendt,⁵ described Hungary’s Revolution as a workers’ revolution against a totalitarian regime which called itself a workers’ state. Bill Lomax directly described the Hungarian revolutionary workers’ organizations as a self-administering state of workers’ councils.⁶

By contrast, Standeisky shows the diversity of organizations which sprang up (revolutionary committees, national committees, national councils, workers’ councils, etc.). She sees the collapse of the dictatorial regime as a state of grace that gave people the chance to produce truly democratic arrangements, setting up new organizations at a local level and at their own initiative. She argues that direct democracy (or more precisely various spontaneous forms of that) can truly work in extraordinary circumstances, because of the special ability of ordinary people to create a meaningful and workable order—at least temporarily. This, in the interpretation given in the book, is what happened in Hungary in 1956. At one point, she says of the achievements of ordinary people: “they put the world that had fallen apart during the Rákosi dictatorship back together: they created real people’s power, and order” (p.272).

Despite being based on a selection of individual events, the account of the Revolution is not overly idealized or one-sided, because it makes the diversity of these events very clear, and presents some less-known features of the Revolution, such as manifestations of anti-Semitism and lynchings. Hannah Arendt claimed in her classic work that there was almost no robbery or looting in 1956, i.e. mob rule did not take hold. Relying on published sources, Standeisky presents some of the more carnival-like moments of the Revolution. She shows that revolutionary and workers’ councils did not form immediately, and all kinds of things happened from day to day. It is not easy to confront or convey the dark side of 1956 in Hungary. As recently as 2006, a play written by András Papp and János Térey for the fiftieth anniversary raised a storm of controversy.⁷ *Kazamaták* is the stage “adaptation” of a notorious historical event, the siege of a Communist Party headquarters building in Köztársaság Square. It confronted informed public opinion with a different face of the 1956. The rebels besieged

5 Hannah Arendt, “Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” in idem, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 480–510.

6 Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976); Bill Lomax, ed., *Hungarian Workers’ Councils in 1956* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs, 1990). For the latest criticism of this view, see Mark Pittaway, *The Workers’ State: Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944–1958* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 230–56.

7 András Papp and János Térey, “*Kazamaták*,” *Holmi* 18, no. 3 (2006): 292–383.

and occupied the building of the Budapest Party Committee on 30 October 1956 and killed 24 people. Among the dead was the Communist leader Imre Mező, a supporter of Imre Nagy. Standeisky distances herself from those who see that event as a “people’s judgement”, and describes such phenomena as “the inflamed mass brutally taking out its anger—a lynching” (p.53). Occasionally, even myth-busting stories turn out not to displace the myths so neatly. Éva Tulipán’s recent book, which treats the events of Köztársaság Square in great detail, tells us that one reason for the siege of the party building may have been that the Communist Party was actually trying to organize security there. The security forces inside had clashed with the rebels several times in the days leading up to the siege, and the defenders of the building used firearms for the first time on 30 October.⁸ Thus a variety of assessments and judgements are possible for every individual and collective action, not just the larger events.

Retrospective social awareness has conditioned us to see the Revolution as a fight between good and bad, and Papp and Térey’s play was the first since the political transition to confront a wide public with how complex the events of the Revolution actually were. The idea that “goodies” can sometimes behave badly is somewhat jarring. The closing line of the play, “The single story disintegrates/ Into one thousand, nine hundred and fifty-six pieces” is a wry pun: the word for “piece” in Hungarian also means “stage play”. Returning to Standeisky’s book, we read that every individual and group action has its own special driving force, behind which we can recognize the general characteristics of human nature. These driving forces, from the evidence of this book, seem to be autonomy and love of freedom. This hardly differs from Hannah Arendt’s insight that the antidote to totalitarianism is spontaneity, the capability of autonomous action, which totalitarian systems try to eliminate, but exists in everybody. But here, individual and community autonomy takes its meaning in democracy, and not within the Marxist ideal of revolution.

Standeisky’s book seems to tell us that in the individual and group actions behind the events of 1956, the force which stood in opposition to dictatorship and everything associated with it was the freedom-seeking spirit inherent in modern society. (The Western treatments quoted assessed the totalitarian system against Marxist ideals, whereas here the moral gauge, or rather the counterpoint, is democracy, which the author claims showed up in 1956 as the alternative to

8 Éva Tulipán, *Szigorúan ellenőrzött emlékezet. A Köztársaság téri ostrom 1956-ban* [Closely Observed Memory. The Köztársaság Square Siege in 1956] (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2012).

dictatorship). This is definitely true if the research approaches the events of 1956 from the perspective of democratic values. In modern times, according to Hannah Arendt, we can give meaning to our own time by regaining the past. The pearl diver does not dive to the bottom of the sea to discover everything that is there; he is only interested in pearls and coral.⁹ This applies even if she sets out to present nearly every phenomenon, including those less important for her own interpretation.

According to Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, terror is a phenomenon that pervades every aspect of social life. In this interpretation, terror is actually the trigger of social resistance and revolution (true also for 1956). The question remains of how to explain how a totalitarian system can survive for a long time, i.e. why it does not prompt members of society to form groups for collective action.¹⁰ This, or how the totalitarian system built itself into the everyday world, is really the central question of the historiography of the Kádár era.

The nature and operation of Kádárism, the new order which was set up in Hungary to stifle the democratic initiatives of 1956, is the subject of the book by János Rainer M. The essays making up *Bevezetés a kádárizmusba* extend their scope to the preceding Rákosi era and the subsequent political transition. Rainer claims that Stalinism and the Rákosi era did not break down every social tradition in Hungary, and the Kádár era made fewer changes to the Stalinist system after 1956 than contemporary discourses might lead us to think. The center of the author's interest, as implied by the title, is the assessment and interpretation of the Kádár era and Kádárism.

The book reflects on the best-known foreign interpretations of the state socialist system, theories of totalitarianism, various schools of revisionism, and interpretations of Stalinism as a civilization. Rainer notes that “the paradigm of ‘totalitarianism’ was to no small extent reborn in Eastern Europe before and after 1989” (p.125). It is difficult, however, to judge the validity of theory from what are often purely ideological applications of it; the oversimplifying interpretations are usually what the revisionists turn against (p.49). In Hungary, the totalitarianism paradigm is usually taken up together with right-wing, highly

9 “Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages.” Hannah Arendt, “Introduction,” in idem, ed., *Illuminations, essays by Walter Benjamin* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 50–51.

10 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 498.

ideologized anti-Communist rhetoric. Nowadays, however, we see these systems as being as open to left-wing criticism (indeed in a democracy they can only be approached critically) as Western capitalism, and even some elements of totalitarianism theory fit into this criticism. The author, in the restrained tones of these essays, implies that he finds the best route to interpreting the Kádár era through methodological multiplicity and a combination of approaches, and that is what he tries to do in this book.

For a long time, the “Kádár system” appeared in both Western and Hungarian historiography as a version of state socialism with a special human face, approaching Western welfare states, a system which made Central and Eastern European totalitarianism liveable, and in fact fundamentally changed it (taming the system from arbitrary and totalitarian to merely authoritarian). Rainer claims that Kádárism was not a system in its own right, but only a shift within the system. These internal changes did, however, combine into some kind of organic whole which might be called Kádárism, a liveable system for a large proportion of ordinary people. The author argues that Kádárism was not as different from the previous era as the contemporary discourses legitimating the rule of János Kádár, and hence today’s discourses, would have it. It is striking, for example, that the word “reform”, regarded in both Hungary and abroad as a uniquely applicable to the system, was almost never used in a positive sense by Kádár himself (p.185–86).

In analyzing the essence of Kádárism, Rainer mentions a “Kádárist feeling” (p.146). He claims this derived not only from the sure knowledge that the country was “the best of existing worlds”, but also from the sense that everything could get worse (and only worse) at any time. He uses this as the general explanation for how the new regime managed to consolidate after the bloody reprisals. The author highlights the eponymous leader’s cynicism (p.27), which was perhaps not so much cynicism as the—not necessarily always conscious—recognition of public expectations, the day-to-day bounds of dictatorship and the limitations of rule. The author characterizes Kádár, who openly distanced himself from his predecessors, as not being associated with personal cult (p.200–14). He implies that the party leader’s behavior also contributed to the consolidation of the state system after its violent restoration. The question remains, however, as to how much this consolidation was directed from above and how much it derived from the will and deliberate action of a leader who seemed (and presented himself as) different from the other state-socialist leaders. In the revisionist approach, this could much better be interpreted as a jointly-developed social practice to

which the First Secretary adapted than as a compromise between “regime” and “society”.

Individuals do not simply subordinate themselves to state power in a dictatorship, but by their actions they accept, transform and—in their own everyday worlds—even create it. State power to some extent depends on the character and actions of its citizens/subjects. It follows from the work of revisionist historians who adopt Foucault’s concepts of power that we can get close to understanding the system via the collective and individual actions which enable it to operate. Stephen Kotkin claims that “Stalinism was not just a political system, let alone the rule of an individual. It was a set of values, a social identity, a way of life. When it comes to Stalinism, what needs to be explained and subjected to detailed scrutiny are the mechanisms by which the dreams of ordinary people and those of the individuals directing the state found common ground in this Soviet version of the welfare state.”¹¹ The same might be said of totalitarianism in general, and the approach does not actually contradict the essential claims of totalitarianism theories (which link the substance of dictatorship to modern forms of violence) but examines the everyday implementation of totalitarianism and seeks the explanation of the sustained existence of totalitarian systems in the world of everyday life.

What ordinary people actually got from Kádárism, and what compromises or everyday practices confirmed the system’s legitimacy in the Kádár era, are fundamental questions. The discourses of the period hold that the system, starting in the 1960s, created rising standards of living and relative welfare in Hungary (Rainer also mentions the complex relationship between these discourses and everyday realities). Recent research, however (books by Béla Tomka and Sándor Horváth) largely refute this.¹² This work no longer looks to the other countries of the Soviet system for a basis of comparison but to Western democratic social policy, whose fundamental aims diverged from those the social system built up in Hungary after 1956. Hungarian social policy was aimed at legitimizing state institutions, the state, and even the social system itself. It was a system which

11 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 23.

12 Béla Tomka, *Welfare in East and West: The Hungarian Welfare State in an International Comparison, 1918–1990* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003). Béla Tomka: *Szociálpolitika a 20. századi Magyarországon európai perspektívában* [Social Policy in Twentieth-Century Hungary in a European Perspective] (Budapest: Századvég, 2003); Sándor Horváth, *Két emelet boldogság. Mindennapi szociálpolitika Budapesten a Kádár-korban* [Happiness on Two Storeys. Everyday Social Policy in Budapest in the Kádár Era] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2012).

gave no opening for real representation of interests, and especially not public collective representation.

According to Kotkin, what emerged under state socialist regimes was an “uncivil society”. The establishment was the only formation which was a real organized unit (set against unorganized groupings).¹³ The contemporary elite and bureaucracy, through their organization and their positions within society, thus arranged the systems of distribution to operate according to their interests. The uncivil logic, i.e. the lack of autonomy and solidarity and the imposition of narrow interests ran through not only the old establishment (i.e. top down) but society as a whole (nearly everybody had something to lose). The paternalist policy ultimately proved successful because—until the nineteen eighties—neither the social injustices nor any other cause triggered mass protests.¹⁴

Rainer’s book gives us a much more textured account of the Kádár era and the operation of the state socialist system in general than previous approaches, which confined themselves to political history. It challenges the assertions that the Kádár era can be sharply delineated from the Rákosi era and that the system’s internal changes during the period directly led to the political transition. This may encourage us to examine the state socialist system in Hungary as a separate civilization and its operation according to its own rules. If we give up the notion of all-embracing total power, we also have to reject the idea that dictatorship was driven initially purely by violence and later by compromises offered by the regime. Nonetheless, we are left with the question of why the society that was the champion of freedom in 1956 (in its own and the world’s eyes) uniformly accepted—or seemed to accept—the framework and existence of the state socialist system. Viewed from close up, how can we explain the phenomenon Rainer calls the “Kádárist feeling”?

Today, it seems that consolidating state socialism, after the feeling of permanent threat and vulnerability of the period of catastrophe and the Rákosi era, created a kind of peaceful opportunism in Hungary. After 1956, the unalterability of the system (and the need for collaboration/cooperation with the regime) did indeed seem to become a general awareness, or almost a shared attitude to life. A basic question in this regard is whether individual and collective anger against the system existed or could have existed in the Kádár era, and if so, in what form. Another question is how these behaviors relate to the

13 Stephen Kotkin (with a contribution by Jan T. Gross), *Uncivil Society. 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2009).

14 Horváth, *Két emelet boldogság*, 242.

individual and collective behaviors seen in 1956. In my view, two social science concepts could be adapted to interpret the formation and everyday working of Kádárism, and they cannot be understood solely by the theoretical models of totalitarianism.

German historians of everyday life developed a highly influential theory to describe the legitimacy of dictatorships and the effect and significance of individual actions in these regimes. This theory borrows from German literature and philosophy the concept of *Eigensinn* (“sense of one’s own interests”) to describe the behavior and motivations of the “majority”, i.e. people who were neither enthusiastic disciples nor active opponents of the Nazi or Soviet dictatorships but whose everyday work and passive behavior, by not presenting resistance, helped these systems to build up and endure. The word implies a kind of self-sufficiency and independence; not the free will of free persons, but the will of citizens who can (and do) adapt to various kinds of regime while keeping their own direct interests in view.¹⁵ Set against this is the concept of autonomy, the kind of everyday behavior which inhibits the emergence and persistence of totalitarianism and which should, in principle, be typical behavior in a democracy. Whether it is democracy which creates autonomous behavior, and dictatorship which creates *Eigensinn* and everyday forms of collaboration, or these things happen the other way round, is a complex question, and the perspective of study obviously has a bearing on the answer.

The social sciences, following Nietzsche,¹⁶ use the term *ressentiment* to denote the impotent vengeance and collective passions aroused in ordinary people by

15 On the *Eigensinn* concept, see Alf Lüdtke, “Geschichte und ‘Eigensinn’” in *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte. Zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte*, ed. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (Münster: Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, 1994), 139–53.

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969). The historical adaptations of the concept: Robert C. Solomon explains the English expression *resentment* as always being directed to people of higher rank, anger to those of the same rank, and contempt to those of lower rank. Robert Solomon, “One Hundred Years of Ressentiment: Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 95–126. In one of Sheila Fitzpatrick’s essays, following Arno Mayer’s study of revolutionary violence—Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001)—she analyzes the role of vengeance and *ressentiment* in the Russian Revolution, by which she means the four decades of Soviet history following 1917. This ascribes the main driving force of the series of events labelled “the revolution to the resentment of everyday people. The collective anger of the mass was directed at the bourgeois elites at the beginning of the revolution, the Russian intellectuals in the late 1920s, the Communist administrative elite (or bureaucracy) by the late 1930s, and the Jews by the late 1940s and early 1950s. Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Vengeance and Ressentiment in the Russian Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 24 (2001): 579–88.

unjustly inflicted injuries and expressed in terms of justice or their own sense of “right”. This is violently suppressed resistance, the post-terror condition, the forced renunciation of resistance. At such times, ordinary people—having no defeatable opponent or space for real action—become incapable of resistance. The actions of individuals thus serve purely their own personal interests and act against, and restrict, each other. Today, we do not look back on these individual and collective authoritative behaviors as revealing aspects of the past or points of reference (going back to the pearl-diver metaphor: as pearls or coral), but they may nonetheless have been important driving forces behind the events.

In the Kádár era, the majority were not true disciples of the dictatorship, but neither were they its opponents. As simple citizens, they adapted to it because they were concerned with their own interests. These were the behaviors that may have created “Kádárism” in everyday life. It was in the basic interests of the new regime that the party leadership not be the target of suppressed or repressed resentments, and that people should seek the enemy in invisible forces or external, occupying powers. Nearly every symbolic act of the era’s eponym (who retained a long grip on power) was directed at having the truly suppressed groups of society see him as a man of *ressentiment*, someone who really was no different from them, the ordinary people, and who represented their interests.¹⁷ Totalitarian systems have given rise to innumerable forms of collaboration, and the concepts of terror and resistance in themselves are insufficient to explain them, in Hungary as elsewhere. What made the Kádár era? Very briefly, a social need for it in the prevailing conditions of dictatorship; this is one of the uncomfortable lessons of studying “Kádárism”.

Translated by Alan Campbell

György Majtényi

¹⁷ An adaptation of the concept of *ressentiment* to the Kádár era: György Majtényi, *Vezérsel. Kádár János mindennapjai* [Queen’s Gambit. The Everyday Life of János Kádár] (Budapest: Libri Kiadó–Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, 2012).