

*Agitátorok: Kommunista mozgósítás a pártállam kiépítésének mindennapjaiban (1948–1953)* [Agitators: Communist mobilization in the everyday life of the construction of the party state, 1948–1953]. By Heléna Huhák. Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2022. 271 pp.

The new monograph by Heléna Huhák links the history of the construction of the Rákosi regime and its grand narrative of party history (told as a romance) with the microhistories of the agitators who translated this narrative into the language of everyday people. Huhák shows “how agitation, meaning the implementation in practice of the propaganda based on the ideology of the communist system, was actually carried out” (p.10). As her point of departure, she asks the following question: how did the state manage to mobilize the masses to take part in political events, for instance by showing support for the party state at celebrations and demonstrations, in spite of the fact that their everyday experiences (falling standards of living, economic problems, systemic violation of rights, and repression) contradicted the propaganda messages?

Huhák offers analyses of the social mobilization campaigns introduced in Hungary on the Soviet model and then ventures answers based on these analyses to her fundamental question of how state socialist propaganda worked in the Rákosi era. She presents the images of enemies in the propaganda slogans (as G. K. Chesterton reminds us, after all, it is hatred that unites people, not love, a notion that George Orwell presented with dramatic force in his dystopic novel *1984*), as well as the various topoi and interpretive schemata. Alongside this, the book’s discussion of political and social history examines the methods used to recruit agents and set up the agitation and propaganda network of the Hungarian Workers’ Party (the communist party in Hungary). The continuous campaigns required the creation of a layer of party workers who were engaged “full-time” in agitation. The book examines the so-called “people’s educators” (who for instance held talks on history, culture, and social issues that harmonized with the party ideology) as a social group, presenting their activities as part of “everyday socialist life,” focusing thus on the implementation of propaganda on the local level rather than grand policy decisions.

The perspective that Huhák adopts places her book among the representatives of *Alltagsgeschichte*, which proposes to look at politics from below. Huhák omits the “party” as a collective subject from her narrative (thus breaking from common practice in the literature, where one can all too easily find examples of phrases such as “ordered by the party” “implemented by the party,” etc.). Huhák

thus emphasizes that the party state “apparatus” should not be imagined as a monolith which simply implemented decisions like some kind of automaton. Nor does she see the masses (the citizenry) to be persuaded and mobilized by the agitators as passive recipients or even helpless victims (as the proponents of the notion of totalitarianism as an exhaustive principle of explanation have tended to do, though this notion has been somewhat anachronistic for a good half century now). Rather, Huhák calls attention to the strategies used by “everyday people,” which included forms of cooperation, manipulation, and even resistance in the party state.

Although there are seemingly innumerable works of secondary literature on communist propaganda in Hungary (one should certainly mention Viktor Szabó’s 2019 book *A kommunizmus bővületében*, or “In the Thrall of Communism,” on the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and Balázs Apor’s 2017 work *The Invisible Shining* on the cult of Mátyás Rákosi), almost none of them consider the roles and activities of agitators (though there are works of Hungarian fiction which touch on this question, for instance Ervin Sinkó’s novel *Optimisták*, or “Optimistics”). Part of the explanation for this lacuna in the literature undoubtedly lies in the simple fact that it is more difficult to pass moral judgment on the lower-ranking functionaries involved in the running of the partystate. It is not hard to pass judgment on Erzsébet Andics, for instance, a historian and communist politician who played prominent roles under the Rákosi regime (one often hears the contention that “the historian is not a judge,” but judgment is inescapably coded into any historical narrative). The case of Vera Angi, however, was more complex (Vera Angi is the protagonist and titular character of Pál Gábor’s 1979 film). It is morally and intellectually more comfortable to deal with perpetrators and victims, and not with the grey zone in between, though as Huhák reminds us, “the communist parties did not function as isolated and closed organizations in the individual socialist states, but rather were an integral part of society” (p.14).

The research is based primarily on the vast array of surviving party documents, mainly from 1948–1952, and the documents of the district party leaderships, including the reports of the people’s educators. Of these, Huhák has chosen the documents of the party organization of District XIII, as the study of the propaganda campaigns in this district promised to be particularly exciting. In 1950, the neighborhood known as Újlipótváros, which had been part of District V and was home, in general, to people who belonged to the more educated social classes, was annexed to the neighborhood known as

Angyalföld, the population of which was 72 percent working class. The strong differences between these two neighborhoods and the various images people associated with each clearly could have had some impact on the organization of propaganda campaigns and the ways in which mobilization was carried out. In order to draw a contrast with the various methods and approaches used in District XIII, Huhák also examines the work and activities of the people's educators in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, drawing on district party committees reports on prevailing mood and agitation efforts. She thus offers an opportunity to compare the propaganda campaigns in the capital city and the rural periphery. (In her study of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, Huhák seems to have been inspired and have drawn on Tamás Kende's *Az intézményes forradalom* [The Institutional Revolution] published in 2014, in which Kende examines the village customs of the county. Kende's discussion is one of several important works in the literature on the basic organization of the party which show that the party state was not as monolithic as it attempted to portray itself in its own propaganda.

Huhák notes, however, that party documents are hardly reliable sources if one seeks to craft a reliable picture of social realities at the time, since "reports prepared for internal use distorted information about the functioning of the socialist dictatorship" (p.17). Reports on propaganda efforts cannot be understood as trustworthy sources which offer glimpses of reality. Rather, they offer glimpses of the ways in which the people's educators sought to portray reality. Although neither Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's seminal 1966 work *The Social Construction of Reality* nor anything by Michel Foucault (who devoted a lifetime of work to the intertwining of discourse and power and the constructive power of groupings) appear in bibliography, the indirect influence of the ideas of these authors on the approach adopted in *Agitátorok* is evident. One could cite the following sentence as an example: "In the process of writing the report, the people's educator grouped the residents with whom he had spent time into the categories used in the report and created stories about them to match" (p.11).

The people who trained to become agitators learned the propagandistic stories (which were intended to shed light on the connections between big politics and everyday life and which were also the inspiration for the reports that were later submitted) from the various brochures and through on-site exercises. The most important publications in this body of brochure literature were *Népnevelő* (People's Educator) and *Agitátor* (Agitator), of which between

some 170,000 to 180,000 copies were printed in 1949 (p.43). The catechisms (such as, “What should we talk about in the village?” or “Mrs. Optimist talks to Mrs. Pessimist”) provided ammunition for the popular educators and for their reports on their work by offering sample questions and answers, instant argumentative principles, and data. As Huhák notes, “in the narratives of the reports, the characters in the *Népnevelő* booklets appeared in the tenement houses, the grocery stores, and the churches of Angyalföld, and they behaved in noticeably similar ways. The propaganda stories thus changed perceptions of reality” (p.50).

Analyses of the discourses of the agitator reports and discussion of their plot patterns, *sujets*, fables, and recurring *topoi*—for example, the story template about “apolitical women” (p.67)—could well have filled an exciting volume on their own. But what is particularly interesting is that the reports, which used the language of the propaganda of power (and thus constructed rather than described the world), were then submitted back to the party apparatus, which read them as “authentic” accounts of “reality.” It is thus hardly surprising that the party state “broke from the masses” (to quote a recurring phrase used in self-criticism of the party leadership).

One of the essential thesis statements of *Agitátorok* is that the reports that were submitted by the agitators should not be regarded as documentation of the efforts to “educate the people” but rather as key elements of the work these agitators performed. As Lenin himself emphasized, “the educators must be educated,” which meant learning the communist discourses (and word games, which Stephen Kotkin has characterized as “speaking Bolshevik”) through the process of writing reports. In her analyses of the reports, however, Huhák comes to the conclusion that the agitators often did not manage to master this language. According to a September 1954 memo, many propagandists “were not even familiar with such basic concepts as class, class struggle, the people, or the mode of production” (p.42). This was because the more talented members of the agitator cadre were promoted to higher levels to perform more important tasks, and thus the ideologically poorly trained people’s educators often had a grasp of their tasks and the ideas behind them that hardly went beyond mere recantation of key terms and phrases.

Before 1948, agitation mainly meant recruiting people to join the party, and by the time the Hungarian Workers’ Party was created in 1948 with the forced merger of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary and the Hungarian Communist Party (which really meant the liquidation of the Social Democratic

Party), the party already numbered some 887,000 members. This huge mass had to be mobilized by the agitators during the elections and other campaigns (such as the campaign to call for the “peace loan” or the anti-clerical campaign that accompanied the arrest of Archbishop of Esztergom, József Mindszenty). The number of agitators always swelled before elections, for example from 70,000 to 250,000 during the 1949 elections. But how many of these people were simply educators “on paper,” i.e., agents who did very little actual work? According to Huhák, the inclusion of someone’s name on the lists of agitators did not necessarily mean active participation, agitation often took place only on paper. In addition, party members sometimes did not even know that, under pressure to show results, in the reports submitted to the Agitation and Propaganda Department, the party secretary characterized them as people’s educators. The people’s educators often sought to find ways to get out of doing the tasks with which they were charged, and the high turnover rate among the agitators suggests that the number of “passive participants” was high and the work of agitation was often unrewarding.

Huhák also persuasively shows how the stories written on the basis of the plot models learned by the agitators in the training processes were shaped by the people’s educators according to their own goals. During the local agitation campaigns, there was room for people to pursue their own interests, and not only in one direction. In other words, the people who were the objects of these campaigns could use the agitators (and through them, the reports that were submitted to the higher authorities) as a channel of information, bringing their housing and public utility complaints to the party leadership. The most entertaining example of this was perhaps the case of women lobbying for cooking classes for men. They managed to send, through the agitators, the following message: “we are trying to study, to do party work, but we don’t have time for everything, so I ask the party organization to start a cooking course for our husbands so that we too can have some free time” (p.140).

People had to be cautious with their complaints, however. Anyone who went too far risked being labeled “politically underdeveloped,” “under the influence of the enemy,” or “reactionary.” As Huhák observes, “the individuals targeted by the people’s educators had to find a balance between complaining and expressing faith in the party” (pp.218–219). With her new book, Heléna Huhák offers a superb example of a deconstructive reading of sources on which a critical narrative of history can be based. She dismantles a series of topoi related

to the Rákosi regime by adopting a perspective from below and using micro-level analyses. She also offers an array of insights and valuable conclusions for those who are interested in party history and propaganda history in state socialist dictatorships.<sup>1</sup>

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1 This review was written with the support of the János Bolyai Research Scholarship.