Author: Horvabe; URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c1/Flag_of_Hungary.svg/125px-Flag_of_Hungary.svg.png

Hungary: The Search for a Usable Past

Paul Hanebrink

Cultures of History Forum, published: 17.05.2015

DOI: 10.25626/0042

Hungarian post-1989 politics has been very much defined by contrasting interpretations of the regime change and its aftermath. The article shows how these differences shaped Hungary's political landscape, now very much defined by the Fidesz party. Moreover, the article reveals how the political context has shaped (and often distorted) debates about fundamental issues in the country's more distant past, including the loss of territory after 1918, the interwar period and the comparison of German and Soviet occupations as two totalitarian evils.

Recommended Citation

Paul Hanebrink: Hungary: The Search for a Usable Past. In: Cultures of History Forum (17.05.2015), DOI: 10.25626/0042

Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the copyright holders. For permission please contact the editors.

 Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

Hungary: The Search for a Usable Past

In Hungary, the transition from Communism in 1989 took place far more gradually than it did in neighboring countries. The change of system (rendszerváltás) did have its iconic moments. In June 1989, Imre Nagy, prime minister of Hungary during the 1956 revolution, was reburied, his body taken from an unmarked parcel in a Budapest cemetery and laid to rest again, this time with the reverence and dignity befitting a head of state and national hero. That same month, Foreign Minister Gyula Horn gave the 1989 another of its signature images, when he joined his Austrian counterpart Alois Mock with shears to cut through the barbed wire that separated the two countries. And yet, there were no clashes in Hungary between an emboldened citizenry and a police-state desperate to keep its grip on power, as in Leipzig. There were no crowds of men and women who gathered in the cold nights of November to demand democratic change, as in Prague. And there certainly was no chaotic violence that ended with the bodies of dead leaders shown on television, as there had been in Romania. Instead, Round Table talks with the non-Communist parties agreed to political and constitutional changes. Then the Hungarian Communist Party simply legislated its way out of power.

In the first years after 1989 the political tensions between the Left[1] and the Right, dominated after 1994 by the FIDESZ party, led by Viktor Orbán, turned around one question: how much had the system changed during the system-change? As Árpád von Klimó notes in his contribution, this conflict never crystallized around a single issue. Rather, it colored every substantive debate on policy, political direction, and social mores. The most positive analysts of the transition praised the country's 'lawful revolution' which had dramatically expanded civil liberties, introduced truly free elections, and allowed for open discussion on issues suppressed during Communist rule. But many Hungarians were unconvinced. The post-Communist Right complained that the new elite resembled the old one in too many ways. They argued that many of the country's cultural and economic leaders enjoyed their influence and power because of connections they had made within the Party before 1989. They also accused their political enemies of working for the old regime in ways that should now rob them of all moral authority. The Left, in turn, warned that their opponents were so eager to sweep aside the vestiges of Communism that they had begun to revive dangerous and long-buried political traditions from the years before World War II. More generally, observers across the political spectrum wondered how the relatively permissive years of late socialism – apostrophized in the person of the party chief, János Kádár – had affected Hungarian society. Were Hungarians prepared to accept economic sacrifices as part of the transition to a liberalized market economy? Or were they instead 'the people of Kádár' (Kádár népe), politically passive and ready to support whichever party promised the most comfortable living standards?

For the first two decades, political power swung back and forth between Left and Right.[2] However, the FIDESZ party crushed its opposition at the ballot box in 2010 and won a decisive two-thirds majority in parliament. Empowered by this mandate, the Orbán regime declared its intention to complete at long last the 'change of system' that 1989 had promised but never delivered. In this spirit, the FIDESZ government has pushed through sweeping constitutional, political, and economic changes in recent years. The party's supporters celebrate these achievements as long overdue. Its critics describe them as the work of an authoritarian post-Communist regime that has begun to look suspiciously like its pre-1989 predecessor.

This political context has shaped (and often distorted) debates about fundamental issues in the country's past. These include: the loss of territory after World War I, the re-evaluation of the interwar period as a source for positive political traditions in the present; and the comparison of German and

 Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

Soviet occupation as comparable totalitarian evils.

The Trauma of Trianon

In 1918, Hungary lost over two-thirds of its historic territory. This dramatic national catastrophe was decided at the Paris Peace Conference and written into international law by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. The country was reduced to a small Danubian state. Millions of ethnic Hungarians become minorities on the other side of Hungary's new borders.

During the Communist period, the rhetoric of brotherhood between socialist nations made the memory of territorial loss into an official non-issue. Only towards the end of the 1980s did the issue return to national discourse, as efforts to raise awareness of the (very real) discrimination against ethnic Hungarians in Romania contributed to the rebirth of civil society in Hungary.

After 1989, Trianon returned to the center of public debate. The new post-Communist Right insisted that the trauma of this national cataclysm had not been acknowledged for over forty years and searched for ways to overcome the divisions that Hungarians in Hungary from their ethnic brethren across the border. Some of these gestures provoked serious mistrust among Hungary's neighbors, as when the first prime minister after 1989, József Antall, declared his intention to be the prime minister of "15 million Magyars in spirit", a number that clearly included Hungarian minorities abroad. In the years that followed, it was the Right that most successfully laid claim to the historical symbolism of Trianon. Public events in Hungarian communities abroad became occasions for political leaders like Viktor Orbán to express their solidarity with the ethnic Hungarian minorities while simultaneously demonstrating their nationalist credentials at home. In 2010, the new FIDESZ-led government made June 4, the day in 1920 when Hungarian politicians had been forced to sign the Treaty of Trianon and a day of national mourning throughout the interwar period, into an official state holiday called the Day of National Solidarity. To liberal critics, this seemed a cheap and dangerous attempt to whip up patriotic enthusiasm by playing with the outdated symbols of border revision. On the right, these objections only proved that the Left did not truly identify with the nation.

No Hungarian government has made revising the country's borders into a foreign policy goal. But this has not prevented the extreme right from putting memory of a once-large Hungary at the center of a new aggressive and xenophobic nationalism. Bumper stickers of the country with pre-1918 borders and posters celebrating the sixty-four counties of historic Hungary circulate widely in far right social milieux, where anti-Roma and anti-Semitic language is common. Nor has it meant that the mainstream right has not joined them in positively re-evaluating figures from the interwar era whose commitment to border revision extended into outright racism. Perhaps the most emblematic case has been the rediscovery of the Transylvanian writer Albert Wass, whose novels are filled with devious Romanians, evil Jews, and pure-hearted Hungarians. Convicted of war crimes by a Romanian court, Wass emigrated to the United States where he continued to write novels in this vein until his death. Today, he is widely considered to be a much-neglected national writer whose works deserve wider attention.

From the beginning, the issue of Trianon was imagined as a common national experience and a common national trauma that united all Hungarians across borders and across class lines. Without question, the partition of the country, the migration (sometimes forced, often for economic reasons) of

 Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

ethnic Hungarians to the Hungarian state, and the development of separate minority communities affected the lives of an overwhelmingly broad spectrum of Hungarians throughout the twentieth century. Yet a new generation of social historians has shown clearly that this experience was not uniform, and that it varied greatly depending on location, time period, and social class. Employing the most recent methodological approaches to national identity[3] these scholars suggest that the national trauma of Trianon was not a self-evident experience, but itself a socially and culturally mediated discourse. This work promises a fresh approach to a debate that has long been filled with cliches and stereotypes about victimization, shock, and inevitable ethnic antagonisms. However, there is no evidence that this work has had much impact so far outside scholarly circles.

The Horthy Era: The Search for a Usable Past

As the Communist regime dissolved, anti-Communist nationalists looked for models to follow to re-establish a viable political Right in a country where it had been absent for over forty years. Many turned to the era between the two world wars to find a usable past. During these decades, Hungary had been a kingdom without a king, its continuity with the past represented by a former Habsburg admiral turned head of state, Miklós Horthy. Horthy's Hungary had a reasonably free press, and a multi-party system. But a governing party held power throughout the entire period; voting was restricted to a minority and supervised in rural areas by landholders and gendarmes; and the labor movement was reduced to irrelevance. Moreover, the regime had come into being as a violent reaction against the democratic and Bolshevik revolutions of 1918 and 1919, and there was a sizable minority of radical rightists who believed that a chance to radically purge Hungary of its political and ethnic enemies had been lost when conservative politicians restored stability to the country in the early 1920s. After 1945, Communist historians labeled the period “Horthy-fascism.” By the 1980s, however, a more balanced assessment of the era as conservative or authoritarian was possible. The new post-Communist Right wanted to go even further and declare the Horthy era a positive model that offered important lines of political and intellectual continuity to the present.

The era had a lot to offer to those in search of a usable past. First, the Horthy regime had been clearly anti-Communist. Many of its leading figures had take part in the counter-revolutionary backlash to the 1919 Bolshevik regime, and anti-Communism remained a constant point of consensus across most of the political spectrum throughout the period. Second, the regime had been zealously nationalist, rejecting the partition of Hungary as a 'dictated' peace that would never stand. Politicians and intellectuals of all stripes shared a common concern for the fate of the ethnic Hungarian communities across the borders, driving a rich and multi-faceted debate about the essence of national identity that bound all Hungarians together no matter where they lived. Finally, the Horthy regime had also declared itself to be “Christian-nationalist” in its values. During these decades, the Christian Churches had enjoyed great cultural and social prominence. To the Right after 1989, this combination of anti-Communism, strong nationalism, and Christian conservatism seemed the ideal ideological-moral foundation on which to construct a new post-Communist Hungary. This vision drove the rehabilitation and positive reappraisal of a wide variety of historical figures utterly ignored or demonized as fascist during the years of Communist rule, from the Regent Miklós Horthy himself, to the Prime Minister (and ardent territorial revisionist) Pál Teleki, to the charismatic (and racist) Catholic Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, to a wide variety of writers and intellectuals who had concerned themselves during the 1920s and 1930s in one way or another with the social and cultural threats that other ethnic groups posed to

 Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

Hungarians and Hungarian identity.

This usable past relied on a constitutional fiction. Much like Great Britain, Hungary before 1945 had had no written constitution at all, only a long and elaborate tradition of legal precedents and judicial interpretations. Hungary's first written constitution came in 1949, which was modified in important ways after 1989. In order to re-establish a continuity with the pre-1945 Horthy era, the nationalist Right had to imagine the entire period between 1944 and 1989 as a period in which Hungary's 'true' sovereignty had been suspended. On March 19, 1944, the Germans had occupied Hungary and reshaped the government. After they were defeated, the Soviets had directed the reconstruction of Hungary's political system. The country had regained its lost sovereignty, preserved like a fly in amber, only after forty-five years of dual occupation. Before 2011, these ideas had no legal standing, but they did shape the way many people understood the twentieth century past, and the nation's restored independence after 1989. In 2011, however, the FIDESZ government wrote and ratified a new constitution, in which these ideas were explicitly stated. Most recently, a monument erected on Freedom Square (Szabadság tér) to the (undifferentiated) victims of the German occupation on 19 March 1944 expresses this view of Hungary's suspended sovereignty in concrete symbolic form.

There were, however, a number of problems with this understanding of the Hungarian twentieth century, which have become the core of several long-running debates. The most important of these have to do with the Holocaust in Hungary. While it is true that the ghettoization of Hungarian Jews, and then their entrainment and deportation to Auschwitz did not take place until after the Germans occupied the country, historians have also shown that important measures to marginalize or exclude Jews from Hungarian society and ultimately to transfer their property into "Christian Hungarian" hands had already taken place well before this date. Beginning in 1938, the Hungarian parliament had passed a series of anti-Jewish laws that defined Jews as a separate group under law and curtailed their civil liberties in various ways. There were also an array of civic ordinances, based on these laws, that further discriminated against Jews. The Hungarian government had also drafted Jewish Hungarian men of service age into unarmed labor service battalions, where many met with abusive treatment. Most important, some 18,000-20,000 Jews (some of them Hungarian citizens; others refugees from Poland who sought safety in Hungary) had been deported in 1941 from the sub-Carpathian town of Kőrösmező into German-occupied Ukraine, where they were murdered. Clearly, important preconditions for the Holocaust in Hungary, and for the active participation of Hungarians in it, had already been laid.

For many, these historical facts put into question just how "usable" the interwar past is for a country that has joined the European Union and is therefore formally committed to its liberal and democratic values. Recuperating the Horthy era might well result in resurrecting the illiberal values of that age. After all, many of the intellectuals now held up by the Right as paragons of nationalist commitment (e.g. Dezsö Szabó or Cecile Tormay) had contributed in their writings to the imagination of a Hungarian society "liberated" from "foreign" (above all, Jewish) influences and power. Moreover, the Hungarian political system had produced anti-Jewish laws and measures entirely on its own initiative in the years before 1944. These had not been foisted on the country by Nazi Germany, and could not therefore be separated from the other policies of the pre-1944 "sovereign" Hungarian state. Finally, historians have shown that public support for these measures, and above all for the expropriation and transfer of Jewish wealth, was broad, and that the civil service, which operated continuously before and after 19 March 1944 enforced these orders with very few exceptions. It is simply not the case that Hungarian cooperation with the Nazi occupiers in the segregation and deportation of Hungarian Jewish citizens was the work of a small number of exceptionally wicked men, or that all Hungarians were equal victims of the German occupation.

 Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

Though there has been no single crystallizing debate around these issues, as there was in Poland over Jan Gross' book Neighbors, these questions arise continually around how to commemorate this period in statues and museums, how positively to appraise various aspects of the Horthy regime, and how to integrate the particular fate of Jewish Hungarians in 1944 into the mainstream of Hungarian history. For example, a particular temptation for some has been to set Trianon against the Holocaust as two parallel sorts of national traumas: if the Holocaust was a tragedy for Jews, it is proposed, then so too was the break-up of historic Hungary a tragedy for Hungarians. Quite apart from the fact that the Treaty of Trianon was not an act of genocide (the wilder claims of extreme rightists to the contrary), this line of argument inevitably divides Hungarians and Jews into two distinctly separate groups, rather than allowing for the possibility of a truly Jewish Hungarian identity.

The Possibilities and Ethics of Comparison

The search for a usable past in the interwar era went hand in hand with public discussion of the regime under which Hungarians had lived for four decades. The Communist regime always declared that the arrival of the Red Army to be a 'liberation' from fascism. For Jews in the Budapest ghetto, this was undoubtedly true. But few others could swallow this ideological proposition without irony. From 1990, Hungarians debated how to interpret the years between 1945, when a provisional government was established, and 1948, when the Communist Party declared one-party rule. Had this been a brief period of democratic possibility or had the writing, in the form of clear plans for Communist domination, been on the wall from the first? At the same time, many seized the opportunity to remember victims of the Communist regime, such as those imprisoned as 'class enemies' at labor camps like Recsk, or those persecuted, tortured, jailed, and even murdered by the secret police, the ÁVO.

This explosion of commemorative energy had consequences for memory of 1944 as well. Many have found it natural to set the crimes committed by the Communist regime in an explicitly comparative context with the crimes of the Nazi occupation, above all the Holocaust. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the House of Terror museum. One of two (soon to be three) museums in Budapest devoted at least in part to the events of 1944-45, the House of Terror begins with the final acts of World War II in Hungary, the chaotic rule of the fascist Arrow Cross Party between 15 October 1944 and the end of fighting in Budapest in February 1945. The museum has very little to say about the deportation of Jews from the country, which took place before this date, and nothing at all about the legal and political legacies of the years before 1944. It does, however, devote the majority of its exhibition to a detailed examination of the crimes committed by the Communist regime before 1956: labor camps, secret police terror, forced collectivization, the suppression of religious liberties, etc. It is therefore easy to come away with the impression that the crimes of the Communist era are more central to Hungarian history, both because they took place over a longer period of time, and because they impacted more people.

This impulse towards comparative studies of suffering is symptomatic of one final aspect of memory culture in Hungary, and indeed in all of Europe's former Communist societies. The possibility of openly discussing the legacy of the Communist regime emerged at precisely the moment when Holocaust memory had become an internationally recognized sign of liberal and democratic civic norms, especially within the member countries of the European Union. Liberal critics of the Right in Hungary hold up Germany as the exemplar of a society that has sincerely attempted to 'master its past' by commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and acknowledging the complicity of ordinary Germans in Nazi crimes. This, they claim, is the challenge that Hungary must accept as a member of the community of European nations. To historians on the Right, however, this position seems far too simplistic and does

 Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

not take into account other tragedies. As always, the line between sober and responsible comparison and politically motivated exculpation is thin and easily crossed. Nor have some participants to these debates been above labeling liberal critics 'anti-national' or 'cosmopolitan', as was the case in the summer 2014 discussions around the occupation monument. These pitfalls make clear just how heavily the ethics of historical memory and commemoration are shaped within a transnational context. The nation may be the subject of national memory debates. But the debates themselves invoke patterns and authorities that transcend national borders. In Hungary, as elsewhere, the ethics of historical memory and commemoration are both global and local at once.

Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

Footnotes

1. For much of the time a coalition of the formerly Communist, now Socialist, Party and a small but influential group of left liberal Free Democrats.
2. In 1994, a coalition of socialists and left-liberals replaced the first non-Communist government; in 1998, voters chose the Right, led by FIDESZ; in 2002, the Left was voted back into government and then re-elected in 2006.
3. See Rogers Brubaker, Ethnicity Without Groups, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004 and with Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea, Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.

Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved.