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Reviewed by András Schweitzer, Independent Scholar

"The Glorious 133 Days" is a concept remembered by perhaps every Hungarian student of the 1970s and 1980. Considering how often "Communism" is nowadays treated in Hungarian public discourse as a forty-year era of uniformity one should perhaps forgive those assuming that this complimentary time-expression has become, since the communist takeover in 1949, the official shorthand for the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. Likewise, we should forgive those who believe that all post-1949 generations of Hungarian pupils were taught to envy the needy kids for the chocolate drinks with whipped cream that the 1919 short-lived revolutionary government allegedly distributed to them during those 133 days.

Yet, as Péter Apor's book shows in great detail, the forty-year uniform official treatment of 1919 is a false assumption. To begin with, in the first couple of years of communism after 1949 the Hungarian Soviet Republic was not yet portrayed as the glorious peak of national history. Rather, its story was deemed too controversial as its principal leader Béla Kun (1886-1939) had been executed during the late 1930s Stalinist Great Purge. So after the communist takeover in 1949 until the posthumous rehabilitation of Kun in early 1956, his role was ignored or, alternatively, Kun was referred to as either a traitor and imperialist agent or an inappropriate leader who had committed fatal mistakes. Whenever officially sanctified history books of the era wanted to highlight bravery during the early communist experiment of 1919, Stalin's "best Hungarian disciple" Mátyás Rákosi (1892-1971, General Secretary of the Hungarian Workers/Communist Party in 1945-1956) took Kun's place as the hero of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and he was even visualized in history books marching with Red Army troops as if he were indeed their Commander-in-Chief. But this substitution of leaders is just one twist in the colorful diversity of the changing representations of "1919," which Apor's book masterfully covers. During decades of communism the narrative of the rise and fall of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic had to be -- and indeed was -- reconstructed again and again following the guidelines of the Hungarian and Soviet communist leaderships. These guidelines were in line with the ever-changing direction of the political combat against the perceived enemy of the country's aspired noble cause of the time.



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The end of the Second World War marked an intellectual division line, ending the era in which the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic was seen as a mostly Jewish-led implementation of an alien and oppressive communist political system. The postwar democratic coalition sought to create a democratic political identity for the Hungarian people and prepared to celebrate the centennial anniversary of the 1848 Revolution as the founding event for modern Hungary, but by the time of the anniversary year the communists became the dominant political force in the country. Instead of downgrading the planned centenary, the post-war communists turned 1848-1849 into a much celebrated prehistory of the Stalinist State, emphasizing modernization, unity, popular pro-worker and pro-peasant politics, and the fight for national freedom. This version of the War of Independence suited the *longue durée* narrative of Aladár Mód's book titled *400 év küzdelem az önálló Magyarországért* ('Four Hundred Years of Struggle for the Independent Hungary'), which was first published in 1943 and by 1948 already had a fourth, expanded edition, and in which Hungarian history was presented as a constant struggle between ordinary folk fighting for national independence and democratic values and a ruling class that is ever ready to compromise on national and social causes.

In 1949 the centenary of 1848 was followed by the thirtieth anniversary of 1919; yet, as Apor shows, the later jubilee was practically confined to celebrating Communist Party history. The initial or "historic" Hungarian Soviet regime was now seen as "the first follower of the Russian October Revolution" of 1917, and the pre-figuration of the 1919 postwar Hungarian Communist State was said to have "pursued the same fight" as the 1948 communists (33). However the relevance of the story of the Hungarian Soviet Republic remained limited and appropriated mainly for learning the lesson from its mistakes and failures; examples for this (ab)use of the 1919 memory are Party Premier Rákosi's criticism of the unification of workers parties, or of the lack of determination in fighting "internal enemies." The foreign intervention, which eventually led to the falling apart of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, was now portrayed by party historians as similar to the actions of the West at the early phase of the Cold War: in both cases American and other "imperialists" were accused of scheming to overthrow communism. Moreover, in the early 1950s, under the shadow of the Stalin-Tito conflict, several Hungarian newspaper articles claimed that the armed intervention against the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 had actually been directed from Belgrade.

After the 1956 violent oppression of the anti-communist Hungarian Revolution the memory of the events of 1919 was suddenly viewed in a new light altogether: the White Terror that followed the downfall of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic was now seen as analogous to sporadic anti-communist actions. For example, the lynching of the defenders of the Party Headquarter at Köztársaság tér on the thirtieth of October 1956 was presented as the second coming of the extra-judicial killings of 1919, and Prime Minister Imre Nagy (1896-1958), the leader of the 1956 Revolution who was executed by the Soviets in 1958, was compared to Gyula Peidl (1873-1943), the social democrat leader of the short lived post-revolutionary transition government of 1919, who was blamed for having deceived the masses while facilitating Horthy's counter-revolution. By the fortieth anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, 1919 was re-constructed as a glorious moment of national history and the genesis of the subsequent continuous historical struggle between "revolutionist" and "counter-revolutionist" forces in Hungary. This was the way modern Hungarian history was interpreted, for example, in a

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ceremonial speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Münnich (1886-1967), who had himself been an active participant in the 1919 "dictatorship of the proletariat" and who had fought in the Red Army. (In retrospect, one can say that the 1988 outburst of Communist Party Premier Károly Grósz, 1930-1996, about the possible return of the White Terror would not have sounded so out of place had we then been able to read Apor's new book).

In the first two chapters of his book Apor maintains a clear-cut chronological division between pre- and post-1956 interpretations of the history of the 1919 Revolution. He then goes on to focus on how the myth of a decades-long revolution (and counterrevolution) was represented by monuments like the Pantheon and the Mausoleum of the Labor Movement in Budapest, as well as by movies, and "evidenced" by judicial proceedings (like the indictment of Colonel Lőrinc Latorczay, the subject of Apor's early research, who was sentenced to death in 1948 for crimes he had committed in 1919-1920). Apor's multi-dimensional treatment of history and its various "texts" inevitably forces on him such compositional decisions as discussing party historian Dezső Nemes' source-book on the counter-revolution not in the book's first chapter, where it would chronologically belong, but in the third, where it fits thematically as it serves to exemplify the techniques of abusing history (such as applying unclear categories and disconnected chronologies) so typical of the postwar communist historiography as well as of its justice system.

A principal merit of the book is its frequent use of comparisons that helps to situate its subject matter within relevant regional and international contexts. The emphasis on anti-German revolutionary legacy, a typical feature of early Hungarian communist historiography, is presented by Apor as a standard characteristic of the region (and also as somewhat analogous to anti-Ottomanism in the Balkan). The Czechoslovak, Bulgarian, and Polish narratives of portraying these new communist states as quintessential outcomes of many centuries of progressive national histories are accordingly discussed, even if only briefly. As for the ideological infrastructure of communism, Apor offers profound and thought-provoking analogies between religious discourse and Marxist views of history. One such analogy relates to the question of how to distance a new faith from its predecessor without denying their essential inter-connections; according to Apor, this was a dilemma of postwar communism regarding the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, just as it had been for early Christianity vis-à-vis ancient Jewish pre-history as manifested in the Old Testament.

The story of the constant re-evaluations of the history of 1919 is so compelling that this reviewer could not resist the temptation to carry out a quick investigation about whether there ever existed a third way between communist historiography in general, which praises 1919 and denounces 1956, and its contemporary democratic counter-historiography, which does exactly the opposite. It turns out that between these two extremes there actually *was* a third path. In newspapers published during the days of the 1956 Revolution, there is a front-page opinion essay by Anna Kéthly (1889-1976), President of the re-established Social-Democratic Party (and later, for one day, a minister in the Imre Nagy government), expressing worry about the return of suffering, reprisals, re-privatization and internments of innocent working people by the counter-revolution, as happened after August 1919 (*Népszava*, November 1st 1956). There is also a front-page manifesto-like article of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, in which the newly formed party on the one hand denounces the anti-national despotism of the Rákosi-Gerő clique and

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aspires to “strengthen the achievements of the national democratic uprising” of 1956 and, on the other hand, declares its willingness to remain faithful to the great tradition of the Hungarian revolutionary labor movement, e.g., “to the workers’ regiments of 1919 that defended national independence against foreign intervention” (*Népszabadság*, November 3rd, 1956). It seems that for a very brief period in Hungarian history there was room for both progressive democrats and their soon-to-be communist pursuers to claim to find some inspiration in 1919 *as well as* in 1956.

In the book's fifth chapter and in its epilogue Apor continues his narrative beyond 1949-1959, the original timeframe of the book, to offer a glimpse of how 1919 was represented in the second half of the 1960s. By the time the gigantic monument commemorating the first communist state was erected in György Dózsa Boulevard in Budapest, in 1969, the constant evocation of the horrors of the 1956 “counter-revolution” stopped and instead the achievements of the revolutionary construction, and with them the concept of a more peaceful “revolution of the everyday,” were advocated through films and other popular-culture means. The Kádár regime consolidated its power by effectively offering relative welfare and peace to the ordinary people who were willing to accept the basic principles of communist rule. No wonder then that this period installed in the minds of its people the concept or slogan of “the glorious 133 days” accompanied by the image of poor children enjoying whipped-cream chocolate drinks for the first time in their lives.

All in all, Apor’s book is a profound study based on a rich collection of sources and an important contribution to Hungarian and Central-Eastern European intellectual history, as well as an exciting case study of the apparently never-ending strife to “use and abuse representations of the past in order to claim legitimacy in the present” (8). Although communist historiography did not meet what we now call academic standards (with statements such as: “Horthy’s army gained the trust of the industrialists by the bestial terror directed against the workers” (120), its craftsmen, unlike Holocaust-deniers, tried not to negate or deny factual evidence. Propagandists, as Apor shows, also made serious efforts to “establish a network of interrelated objects, texts, persons and events” to create “a world out of the interpretations of 1919 with its own internal logic” (23), as well as to treat facts as proof to their own politically-motivated narratives. That their effort did not result in authentic and convincing storylines was usually not the fault of their creativity. Instead, this might be the inevitable outcome of cherry-picking fragments of history in order to uncritically construct and present historical narratives for political purposes.