

Majtényi, George. 2021. *Luxury and the Ruling Elite in Socialist Hungary*. Translated by Thomas Cooper, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 366 pp.

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Hunting lodges, furniture in neobaroque style, chauffeur-driven black Mercedes-Benz cars, heated swimming pools in the Buda hills, lavish champagne brunches in downtown Pest, and exclusive Parisian boutique fashion. The question arises: When and where do these elements place us? After reading George Majtényi's *Luxury and the Ruling Elite in Socialist Hungary*, the answer becomes evident: we are in socialist Hungary. Naturally, this Hungary differs significantly from the lived experiences of the majority, yet Majtényi's comprehensive research, which he consolidates in this book, demonstrates that this was indeed the world that the ruling elite of socialist Hungary inhabited.

Thomas Cooper's translation does justice to the book's flowing, sometimes conversational style, which is intended not only for scholars but also for a wider audience. The book is a collection of mosaic pieces, sometimes intricately interconnected and other times only loosely linked. While the content is entertaining and rich in anecdotal material, it also exposes the extensive research that underlies Majtényi's body of work, spanning decades. The author's seamless navigation through various topics is a testament to his deep knowledge of the subject. While it is uncommon to comment on footnotes within a review, I highly recommend that academic readers peruse those in this book, since they are an unusually rich, extra storehouse of information.

One of the central arguments of the book, connecting its diverse chapters, is that state socialism represents more of a continuation of the pre-World War II Horthy regime than is commonly recognized, particularly when it comes to the lifestyle of the elite. Throughout the book, we are shown how certain socialist traditions, fashion trends, and lifestyle choices trace their origins back to the aristocratic customs of the Horthy era. Additionally, Majtényi draws our attention to the fact that the regime change did not bring an end to many of these behaviors, which have thus persisted for more than a century now.

The book consists of six main chapters, each dedicated to exploring a specific aspect of the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the socialist elite. Drawing on archival sources, manuscripts, and anecdotal material, as well as sociological and historical research, each chapter provides a well-founded contextualization to the primary sources. Majtényi's research is extensive and meticulous, although the reviewer occasionally found the fragmented structure of the chapters to lack cohesion. Yet, the author himself acknowledges this, and to be fair, Majtényi deliberately left out, or relegated material to the footnotes, to keep the book accessible to nonscholarly readers, too.

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The first chapter provides the theoretical background to the terms used throughout the volume and introduces the reader to how the new nomenclature of the socialist regimes was formed. It delves into the intricate dynamics that exist between the elite and the broader public, while also highlighting the significant distinctions between consumption patterns in socialist and market capitalist systems. Majtényi's explanations are lucid and convincingly presented, rendering this chapter essential reading for anyone with an interest in the subject matter.

The book's subsequent sections delve into various facets of the opulent lifestyle embraced by the socialist elite. The second chapter offers a glimpse into their lavish villas nestled on the slopes of the Buda hills. We get to know why János Kádár—general secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party for more than three decades—had chickens in his garden but not a swimming pool, and we learn about the art collections of the nation's leaders as well as the ways they wished to distance themselves from the public. We read about vacation homes, the cars that drove the leaders of the people's republic there, and about exclusive benefits – including access to telephones, foreign travel, medical treatment, and special resting places that were enjoyed solely by the uppermost echelons of the society. The third chapter provides a comprehensive depiction of the hunting societies that were an integral part of the elite's lifestyle. This tradition of hunting, inherited from the Horthy era alongside many of its professional hunters, not only became a beloved pastime of socialist leaders but also served as a symbol of power and a significant source of national pride. This chapter offers a detailed exploration of the role hunting played within the elite circles, highlighting its cultural and political significance during the socialist regime.

The fourth chapter introduces the ways in which the elite established connections with the masses, particularly through soccer. It provides fascinating insights into the extravagant lives led by the players of the renowned Golden Team of the 1950s, as well as the destinies of the Stakhanovites, who were singled out by the regime as role models. This, latter section of the book on Stakhanovites workers stands out as one of its most well-crafted and captivating parts. Moving on to the fifth chapter, the focus shifts to luxury hotels, nightclubs, restaurants, and cabarets, exploring the public and semipublic spaces within socialist Hungary. Readers learn about the emergence of the tourist industry, engage in architectural debates, and witness changes in the urban landscape of Budapest. Additionally, the chapter sheds light on how prostitution and black market trade evolved into centrally regulated yet crucial sources of foreign currency during the Kádár regime. Together, these chapters offer a comprehensive examination of the intersection between the elite and various realms of society, ranging from sports and entertainment to urban development and economic practices. The book concludes with a final chapter that reiterates the persisting parallels and continuities in the behaviors and conduct of the elite across different political regimes.

Majtényi's work is a captivating and informative read that offers valuable insights into the opulent and secretive lifestyles of the socialist elite, appealing—as mentioned earlier, but as merits mention again—to both scholarly and nonacademic readers. It serves as a comprehensive summary of the author's previous research, which, when read in one volume, helps form a broader perception of the age. The book is highly recommended for those interested in gaining a deeper understanding of everyday life in socialist Hungary, as well as to all who believe that we should know history in order to avoid repeating it.