

## **The Legacy of the 1918–1919 Revolutions: A Hundred Years On, Still Contested**

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On October 31, 2019 the prime minister of Hungary unveiled a memorial to the “nation’s martyrs,” victims of the Red Terror during the 1919 Republic of Councils. The memorial is adorned by symbols of Greater Hungary: a giant coffin and the figure of Lady Hungaria, representing the resurrection of pre-1918 Hungary, dissolved in the Trianon Treaty; it stands in a small square adjacent to Parliament, replacing the statue, removed last December, of Imre Nagy, the martyred prime minister of the 1956 revolution. In his speech, László Kövér, the speaker of the National Assembly, characterized the 1919 Republic of Soviets as the culmination of over half a century of civil war, waged from the mid-nineteenth century between agents of secularism, internationalism, socialism, and modernity on one side, and champions of God, family, and the Hungarian nation on the other.

Apart from the vehemence of the tone, there is not much that is new here: these elements of the Orbán government’s view of Hungary’s twentieth-century history, as well as its own role as the heir to the interwar Horthy regime, have been gradually introduced to the public in the last nine years. If anything was surprising at all, it was the degree to which the speech followed the letter and spirit of the 1930s—it could have been easily lifted from an official pronouncement of the mid-1930s. Equally striking was the anachronism of the ceremony: its visual references to a historical (and historicizing) tradition of a certain kind, its reaching for legitimization into the 1930s and epitomized by the Speaker’s traditional *bocskai* jacket, already an anachronistic relic in the 1930s. One is reminded of the famous lines from Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*, depicting the final days of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a time that seemed out of joint: “But in those days no one knew what it was moving towards. Nor could anyone quite distinguish between what was above and what below, between what was moving forwards and what backwards.”<sup>1</sup>

The memorial to the “nation’s martyrs” itself is not new, but is a reconstructed replica of a statue originally erected in 1934 and destroyed shortly after the end of the Second World War in 1945. Moreover, the ceremony itself mirrored the original unveiling, preserved on contemporary newsreel, down to the position of the gigantic national flags, the presence of religious dignitaries, and the traditional Hungarian aristocratic costumes. It seems that when it comes to the legacy of Hungary’s postwar revolutions and their place in the history of the twentieth century, there is, indeed, not much that has moved forward. Aside from the right-wing government’s backward move to the rhetoric and symbols of the authoritarian interwar era, there has been no forward movement towards reaching even a modicum of national consensus, either among historians or the general public. And as the divide between ideologically and politically motivated readings of the traumatic historical events of the twentieth century becomes increasingly entrenched, so do the respective popular narratives, informed by politics and propaganda but also by the memory of familial experiences that have become irreconcilable.

In the following I will offer comments on instances of memory politics associated with the 1918–1919 revolutions from their immediate aftermath to the present; they are but examples that point to continuities and patterns that have stood in the way of not only a scholarly consensus, but also a civil public discourse around these historical events.

Two elements, namely the lumping together of the two revolutions—the October 1918 liberal democratic revolution led by Mihály Károlyi and the March 1919 Bolshevik-inspired Republic of Councils—and the assigning of blame to both for Trianon, were a hallmark of the Horthy regime from the start and have also become tropes in the current Hungarian government’s rhetoric. The essays of Attila Pók on historical cases of scapegoating<sup>2</sup> and the recent, short commentaries on the memory politics around the post-World War I revolutions published in the liberal weekly *hvg.hu* by the young historian Péter Csunderlik<sup>3</sup> do much to illuminate the process by which Károlyi turned from potential saviour of Hungary’s territorial integrity to its gravedigger. The historians rightly note that the counter-revolutionary regime needed a scapegoat—and lumping together the radical and the moderate left, Communists, Social Democrats, and even liberals, well served a regime that built its popular support on a rhetoric of victimhood and betrayal by the West. But I am also reminded of the historian György Litván exclaiming: they hated no one as passionately as they did Károlyi—because they

could never forgive him for betraying his own class. And I would add another psychological motive: they could never forgive him for their having supported him during the last months of 1918.

It is not difficult to see the similarity with today's government's rhetoric to lump together every shade of liberal thought and institution (including the European Union) as foreign and hostile to Hungarian national interests—a continuity that has been made manifest by the removal of Károlyi's monument from in front of Parliament, one of the first acts of the Fidesz government in 2010. A similar psychological explanation might also help explain the almost pathological zeal of the campaign against George Soros waged by the Orbán regime: the need to atone for the Fidesz leaders' own (neo)liberal past and the support by the billionaire philanthropist they had enjoyed at the beginning of their political career.

The Orbán government is of course far from being the first in twentieth-century Hungarian history to distort and exploit the memory of the post-World War I revolutions for political purposes. It is a legacy that had been at the mercy of the changing governments and regimes in the post-1945 era as well. After an initial period of recognition as the First Hungarian Republic, then a demotion (during the Stalinist period) as merely a bourgeois episode, in the 1970s Károlyi and the Hungarian October came to be accepted into the late Kádár era's pantheon of "progressive traditions." This was as much the result of the need to broaden the regime's popular support by going beyond the ideologically confining celebration of the legacy of the Republic of Councils as, curiously, the work of reform, reformed, or non-Communist historians. Led by György Litván and Gyula Hajdú, historians published the first biographies of Károlyi, began to publish his vast correspondence, and even (if with minor redactions) Károlyi's 1956 memoir, *Faith Without Illusions*, written by the disenchanted fellow traveler at the end of his long life.<sup>4</sup> (Károlyi's "rehabilitation" proved to be the first step in a larger project during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the re-discovery of the democratic "counter-culture" of the Hungarian fin de siècle, whose political, literary, and artistic avant-garde served as a predecessor for the emerging democratic opposition of the soft dictatorship of the late Kádár era.)

The legacy of the post-1919 intellectual emigration had been shaped along an almost identical trajectory. Intellectuals and artists who left or escaped during or after the Republic of Councils in protest, because of their involvement, or as a result of the 1920 *numerus clausus* legislation, had been vilified by the Horthy regime; and, with the

exception of those who returned after 1945 as Communists, they continued to be ostracized or were forgotten during the Stalinist period. Their (for the most part) symbolic return in the form of TV interviews, books translated and published, and artistic legacy embraced did not happen until the 1970s—as part of the rediscovery of the early twentieth century’s progressive, modernist counter-culture described above. Even if their legacy cannot be simply erased, today their intellectual and artistic significance has been brought into question with government support and distinctions handed out (as in the interwar or, for that matter, the Stalinist period) largely on ideological grounds, as opposed to artistic or intellectual merit. And as before, such policy favors conservatism and lack of experimentation both in terms of politics and artistic and intellectual expression—so we should not be surprised by the renewed official celebration of the leading right-wing writers and intellectuals of the Horthy era and, in public projects, a reappearance of the interwar period’s trademark “neo-Baroque,” anti-modernist, historicizing style.

This forum discussion was prompted by the centennial of Hungary’s two postwar revolutions, an anniversary that has arrived at the tail end of the tremendous boom of World War I studies, monographs, edited volumes, and conferences generated by the centennial of the First World War. Moreover, the centennial was not an ordinary one, in that it did not mark a single event but one that was prolonged, stretched into four years, and included other events of lasting and global significance, such as the Bolshevik revolution and, tucked on to the war’s end, women’s suffrage in most European and Western countries. (This includes Hungary, where women practiced the right to vote in January 1920.)

We cannot blame historians for not letting anniversaries of significant historical events go without addressing—or, if one wanted to be cynical, milking—them. For they present unique opportunities not only to sell illustrated volumes on such perennial favourites in the history of the First World War as the great battles and the Christmas Truce, but also to consider them in a new light. One of the most fruitful scholarly discussions in twentieth-century European historiography to emerge in recent years was the one that presented a convincing case for making the beginning and end of the war more elastic, reaching back to 1907 and ahead to 1923, and turning the traditional narrative of the conflict between the two military alliances into a European civil war. But there is high irony in the fact that this important discussion, based

on a much more inclusive concept of Europe and the lived experience of considerably more Europeans, has never reached a popular readership.

The last few years also saw initiatives by scholarly institutions and universities in Europe and North America to connect these audiences and engage historians and the public in discussions on the war's social and emotional legacies. For with or without anniversaries, the general public has had an enduring fascination with the First World War. One of the possible reasons for that may be that the Great War had left a lasting mark on European societies, touched almost every family, and has lived on in family lore—and what made this centennial especially significant was the fact that we have now surpassed the “statute of limitations” on participants or eye-witnesses. One of the most disheartening aspects of the current memory wars waged by the Hungarian government is that this centennial passed without a chance to unearth these often conflicting personal and familial memories and confront them—and, potentially, bring them together—in the public realm.

John Horne, one of the leading historians of the First World War and a proponent, with Robert Gerwarth, of a new chronology of the Great War stretching from 1907 to 1923, suggests we take a closer look at defeat when considering the fate of European societies in the wake of the First World War. As he notes, “Defeat looms large in memory, and thus history, because it marks rupture and renewal even more obviously than its inescapable twin, victory.”<sup>5</sup> He cites a great number of cases from postwar European history—but curiously, not Hungary's, even if I believe it would have fit his argument to a T—and argues that if a nation fails to confront and examine its defeat, it will condemn society to continuing trauma. No historian or, for that matter, politician would argue that such a task is easily accomplished. And I was never a fan of the adage about learning from history in order to avoid repeating it. But if there are any lessons to be learned from the rest of the history of the twentieth century, especially of the countries defeated in the First World War, it is that societies should avoid this task at their own peril—that is, if they are engaged in building a future and do not define themselves by their past defeats.

Historians should have a special role to play in this work of exploring and overcoming the traumatic past. Not that we can accuse them of not doing their fair share throughout the twentieth century, from Gyula Szekfű to Erik Molnár, in shaping the memory of the 1918–1919 revolutions—and, generally, supporting political

agendas. The liberal public, ever-diminishing liberal media, and small number of liberal or moderate conservative historians in Hungary have every reason to be outraged by the right-wing excesses of the current government's memory wars and its evocation of the most divisive rhetoric borrowed straight from the Horthy era. But they also have an obligation to offer, if perhaps not an equally and instantly appealing (by way of populist and nationalist rhetoric) but at least a professionally considered alternative, one that is based on an examination of historical evidence and popular memory. And, to close on a mildly optimistic note, there are signs indeed that young Hungarian historians have taken up this call.

## NOTES

1. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities: A Sort of Introduction. The Like of It Now Happens (I)*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), 8.
2. Attila Pók, "Scapegoats in Post-World War I Hungarian Political Thought," *Hungarian Studies* 14, no. 2 (January 2001), 202–06; Attila Pók, *The Politics of Hatred in the Middle of Europe: Scapegoating in Twentieth Century Hungary: History and Historiography* (Szombathely: Savaria University Press, 2009).
3. Péter Csunderlik, "A történelemhamisítás emlékműve" [The monument to the falsification of history], *HVG*, October 31, 2019, [https://hvg.hu/360/201944\\_a\\_tortenelemhamisitas\\_emlekmuve](https://hvg.hu/360/201944_a_tortenelemhamisitas_emlekmuve); Péter Csunderlik, "Összeesküvés-elméletek helyett szembenézés Trianonnal [Instead of conspiracy theories, a reckoning with Trianon], *HVG*, January 11, 2020, [https://hvg.hu/360/202002\\_trianon\\_es\\_azoncsonkitas](https://hvg.hu/360/202002_trianon_es_azoncsonkitas).
4. Mihály Károlyi, *Hit, illúziók nélkül* [Faith without illusions] (Budapest, Magvető); 1977.
5. John Horne, "Defeat and Memory in Modern History," in *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, ed. Jenny Macleod (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 11.