

## **Notes on the Centenary of the 1919 Hungarian Republic of Councils**

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The Hungarian Republic of Councils, or, as it is referred to in shorthand, the Commune, lasted 133 days, from March 21 until August 1, 1919, and inspired Hungarian socialists and left-leaning artists in many ways. While a number of facts about the fundamentally dictatorial nature of the short-lived regime led by Béla Kun have retroactively come to light, during its existence there were, apparently, a number of artists, thinkers, and socialist workers who sincerely believed that it was a political renewal in the direction of social equality. The nationalization of some of the land and the cultural assets of aristocratic families—historic as well as Jewish—remained one of the legacies of the Commune. While it had a troubled history with regard to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, its existence was too short for the regime to become visibly and unequivocally dictatorial. The mixed legacy of the Commune originates precisely from its short existence: a number of the dictatorial measures were just germinating, or not yet visible, before it was crushed.

The Hungarian cultural elite mostly embraced what appeared to be a new era of social justice. Theaters, museums, and art schools all of a sudden opened to everyone, and it was an issue of good faith and unselfishness to engage in the activities of educating poor children and facilitating access to high culture for masses of people. As we know, however, a lot of this was illusory. Lajos Kassák, for example, confesses in his autobiography that the performance of a modernist play by the *Ma* group generated inappropriate reactions in its working-class audience: laughter at the wrong moments, and general lack of understanding. This led Kassák to reconfigure his theatrical and performance events so they included poetry recitals and classical music performed on stage, rather than expressionist stage works.<sup>1</sup> There was no time to educate a new audience that would be receptive to modernist visual and literary languages, and Kassák's early return to a sort of classicism forecast the later dominance of Proletcult and Socialist Realism as art for the masses. With all the good intentions to attract new audiences to

philosophy, sciences, and the liberal arts as they cultivated these in the Galilei Circle and The Free School for Social Sciences, and with further principles elaborated in the more exclusive Sunday Circle,<sup>2</sup> there was only so much they could do in 133 days.

The wave of emigration following the defeat of the Commune drained the Hungarian cultural scene in an unprecedented way. The list of later Nobel Prize-winning physicists, economists, and internationally successful artists and filmmakers is long and well known. A number of Hungarian journals and newspapers mushroomed in Vienna, the free city geographically closest to Hungary, but émigrés settled in many European countries as well as in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Admiral Miklós Horthy's right-wing regime retaliated and introduced the first laws limiting the number of Jewish students in institutions of higher education, which led many young people to seek education abroad. One of the proud statements of Hungarian art history writing is that the Hungarian contingent in the Bauhaus was the largest to attend the school from any single country; but if we consider the quota on Jews in Hungarian colleges and universities, we must see that migrating to Germany to study was not due to the avant-garde mentality of many talented young people, but rather to the restrictions they had to suffer at home.

The memory of the 1919 Commune has been troubled in Hungary. First of all, the general view, instantly generated by the inter-war political regime of Admiral Horthy, was that it was an eminently Jewish enterprise, which made it profoundly unpopular to the majority of the Hungarian population. Confirming this view was the marked, distinguished importance given to it during the post-1945 Communist decades. However, a number of more nuanced and thorough studies in art history, literary history, history, and sociology have revealed a more complicated and realistic image of the idealism and many positive deeds of the participants. Issues 93 and 94 of the Budapest-based theoretical-art historical journal *Enigma*, edited by Csilla Markója, included excellent studies of the activities of artists and art writers during the Commune. Scholarship of the Hungarian avant-garde, especially on Kassák, both in Hungary and the United States, has also revealed many facts and objective notes on the Hungarian avant-garde's history during the Commune, and a lot of the memoirs of the participants from Kassák to Árpád Szélpál<sup>3</sup> to Ervin Sinkó<sup>4</sup> to Anna Lesznai<sup>5</sup> have become available. All this has, in fact, given us a fairly balanced view of the era, even if current Hungarian politics ignore this chapter of Hungarian history.

NOTES

1. Lajos Kassák: *Egy ember élete* [The life of one man] (Budapest: Magvető, 1983), 2:513–14.
2. On these activities and circles, see Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his Generation, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), esp. chap. 2, “The Historical Formation of a Generation,” 43–75.
3. For the memoirs of Árpád Szélpál, written in Paris, see Árpád Szélpál, *Forró hamu* [Hot embers] (Budapest: Magvető, 1984).
4. Ervin Sinkó, *Optimisták – Történelmi regény 1918/19-ből*, [Optimists: A historical novel from 1918–19] (Budapest: Magvető, 1965).
5. Anna Lesznai, *Kezdetben volt a kert* [At the beginning there was the garden] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1966).