

Reflections on the 1919 Republic of Councils

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1) The political, intellectual, and cultural significance and legacy of the Republic of Councils

One hundred years later, the short-lived Republic of Councils in Hungary is not celebrated and hardly remembered. It would be more than a stretch to try to connect the successes of today's political opposition in the local elections (October 13, 2019), which was the first after almost a decade of unchallenged rule of Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party, to the chaotic events of 1919.

But this impossible comparison demonstrates why the memory of the Republic of Councils is so complicated today. The Hungarian experiment of 1919, somehow related to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and more directly to the military and civilian protests and the shifts within the Hungarian Parliament and government in the fall and winter of 1918–19, was, for some of its protagonists, part of a series of world-historical events, which also made it easy for its enemies to exorcise it from Hungarian national history. But it was also embedded in a complex way within the Hungarian socialist labor movement, World War One, the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, and the revolts and nationalist agitations in many parts of the Hungarian Kingdom. In short, it is still today not easy to define clearly what the Republic of Councils even was, and, therefore, it is difficult to connect it to our time. Was it just an attempt to create a Bolshevik state in Hungary, to be aligned with Soviet republics in Slovakia, Ukraine, and Russia, or was it rather an odd coalition of some left-wing adventurers, coffeehouse literati, social reformers, many different social and cultural political movements, modernist artists, and nationalist officers who tried desperately to defend Hungary's borders?

No wonder that the memory of 1919 has been extremely politicized and has never really been a popular *lieu de mémoire* in Hungary, in contrast to the Rákóczi rebellion, 1848, or 1956.

2) The participation of the Hungarian cultural elite in the Hungarian Soviet Republic

The three names mentioned below, Kassák, Lukács, and Lugosi—though many other intellectuals, artists, and social reformers could be added—create a somewhat distorted picture of 1919. Only a small, mostly educated elite—some technocrats, some military specialists—fully engaged in the Republic of Councils. It was in November 1918, when broader strata of the population (mostly) in Budapest, including many women, servants, waiters, etc. who had never been politicized before, went out in the streets to protest or even create new professional organizations or other institutions. But only a few of these more diverse actors were still engaged during the Republic of Councils, and the majority of the middle classes remained absent.

If I may refer to my own family, a possible answer is apparent. My grandfather István Klimó, a young painter born in 1883, had just returned from a POW camp in what had become Poland. On June 12, 1919, at the height of the Republic of Councils, his first child, my father, was born to his wife, Gizella Kovács (b. 1888), a former actress. His older brother Jenő (b. 1873) was a higher civil servant of the State Railroad, had a position that was necessary for the Republic of Councils, and tried his best to feed the family of five (Jenő's daughter, István's wife, and my father). The youngest brother, Endre, and his wife had died of the Spanish flu in Vienna a few months before.¹ It is easy to see that this formerly middle-class family, which did not have any property, had trouble surviving during these months.

While my grandmother was pregnant, her former colleague Béla Lugosi (b. Blaskó, 1882–1956) was very active in 1919. He was only one year younger than my grandfather, had also come from Transylvania, and had been a member of the Hungarian National Theater since 1902 (like my grandmother, who had been on the stage since 1904). During World War I, Lugosi fought as an officer of a ski patrol and was wounded.² In March and April of 1919, Lugosi founded the trade unions of film and theater actors. The decision to participate surely depended on myriad conditions, causes, and motivations. A very ambitious actor like Lugosi, who had also starred in films before World War I, saw it as an opportunity to create something new. He was later also engaged in actors' guilds in Hollywood, and protested the Horthy regime and the Holocaust.

3) The impact of the large-scale emigration of intellectuals and artists on Hungarian and European intellectual and artistic life

The exodus of thousands of intellectuals and artists from Hungary after 1919 contributed to a more provincial or inward-looking interwar culture in Hungary (especially with regard to the film industry), while the émigrés added flair to the literary and film scenes in Vienna, Berlin, and finally Hollywood. However, it is not that easy to measure whether this migration was mostly caused by the reaction against 1918–19, or rather based on individual decisions to seek better opportunities abroad.

4) The role of respective political agendas of successive Hungarian regimes and governments in shaping the memory of the event

The Horthy regime that was established after the collapse of the 1919 Republic of Councils regarded itself as renewing the continuity of the Hungarian Kingdom that was overthrown by the revolution of 1918. It is likely that many Hungarians were hoping that the new regime would bring stability and economic recovery which occurred during the 1920s. For the authoritarian system under Horthy, the demonization and delegitimization of 1918–19 was crucial. Consequently, the end of the Horthy regime and of the short-lived Arrow Cross dictatorship made a reevaluation of 1918–19 possible. However, the Stalinist regime under Mátyás Rákosi had its problems with the Republic of Councils, not least because Stalin had the leader of 1919, Béla Kun, and a few other Hungarian Communist leaders executed, while Rákosi, ironically, had survived the Stalinist Purges because he was imprisoned in Hungary and had only emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1940!

Therefore, it was only in 1969, when the János Kádár regime attempted to create a new image, that the state invested a lot of money in the commemoration of 1919 as part of its attempt to distinguish itself from both the Stalinism of the 1950s and the anti-Stalinist revolution of 1956. During the 1970s and 1980s, this led to a few national, regional, and local commemorations of 1919, but the decline of the Communist regime only accelerated the downfall of its legacy, and the memory of 1919 was finally buried—at least until today—in the anti-Communist fervor of postsocialism. However, there are still some personalities,

like the modernist artist Lajos Kassák, the philosopher György Lukács, and even the Hollywood star Béla Lugosi (who invented the modern Dracula), who participated actively in the Hungarian Bolshevik laboratory of 1919, and who have become icons of Hungarian twentieth-century modernity. The crushing of the Republic of Councils, the brutal, often antisemitic terror of right-wing extremists, and the propaganda of a “Judeo-Bolshevik Myth”³ drove many Jewish intellectuals and artists from the country, but this terrible exodus can hardly be added to the positive legacy of 1919.

When we look at the revival of anti-Bolshevik and revisionist propaganda in today’s Hungary, we also should not forget that the historical context is completely different from the 1920s and 1930s. Hungary and most of its neighbors are now members of the European Union and cultivate excellent diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations, which explains why the revived cult of Trianon (closely related to anti-Bolshevism) does not lead to an outcry in Slovakia, Romania, or Serbia. The neighboring countries know that the references to the Horthy period are mostly directed towards the Hungarian public and the wider Hungarian community in the region.

NOTES

1. In our family archive in the old apartment where Jenő lived since 1905 is a form that Commissar Jenő Landler signed, confirming that Jenő Klimó would keep his position in the Hungarian State Railway Authority (under the Ministry of Commerce).
2. See <https://www.workers.org/2019/03/41345/>.
3. See the recent book by Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).