

The Significance and Legacy of 1918–1919¹

Steven Jobbitt

When viewed in political and transnational context, the revolutionary events of 1918–1919 represent a remarkable juncture in Hungarian history. As an almost inevitable consequence of the destruction and suffering of World War I, the Hungarian People's Republic ushered in by Mihály Károlyi's so-called Aster Revolution in late October 1918 was a direct response to the internal contradictions of Austro-Hungarian capitalism and imperialism, and to the moral and political bankruptcy of the empire's prewar elite and wartime leadership. In turn, the short-lived Republic of Councils (often associated with the name of its commissar for foreign affairs, Béla Kun), emerged as the second socialist state in the world, and replaced the pacifist Károlyi regime with a more revolutionary, militarized response to Hungary's social, political, and geopolitical problems. Fueled by class frustrations and a desire for radical change, Hungary's postwar revolutions were part of a broader global swell of uprisings that included the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, demobilization riots in England in 1918 and 1919, a year of general strikes and revolutionary upheaval throughout Europe and North America in 1919, the intensification of anti-imperial nationalist sentiment in Central Europe and the Balkans, and the explosion of anticolonial movements in the Global South more generally.

Despite their obvious place in both global and national history, the significance of Hungary's back-to-back revolutions in 1918 and 1919 was diminished at the time by the fact that they were short-lived. As others have rightly pointed out, the revolutions were also overshadowed by a series of equally remarkable events that included not only the Spanish flu pandemic and widespread shortages due to war, but also the occupation of significant swathes of Hungarian territory by foreign armies, a growing internal refugee crisis, and, in the wake of the collapse of the Kun government in early August 1919, the White Terror, the emergence of the Horthy regime, and the territorial

dismemberment wrought by the Trianon Treaty. Viewing the events of 1918 and 1919 from his vantage point as a gymnasium (high school) teacher in Karánsebes (now Caransebeș in Romania), the Hungarian geographer Ferenc Fodor described a world turned upside down and rendered unfamiliar, dangerous, and unsettling. Having visited Budapest in early January 1919, Fodor would later reflect on the “total chaos” he witnessed in the capital, and recognized that this would result in nothing less than the complete loss of Hungary’s multi-ethnic hinterland.² For Fodor, the revolutions at the nation’s center were in many ways merely the backdrop against which a more serious national crisis was being played out, one that would lead first to the “foreign” occupation of Hungary’s outlying regions, and ultimately to the disastrous truncation of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1920.

As dramatic as Fodor’s account of 1918–1919 may have been, his reason for visiting Budapest in early 1919 sheds important light on another aspect of this revolutionary period, at least as far as professionals like Fodor go. Traveling to Budapest as a young geographer and aspiring scholar, the conservative-nationalist Fodor was visiting the capital to meet with more well-established geographers, and was keen to present them with his first major work, a geography of the Szörénység region. As Róbert Győri has illustrated in some of his recent research, for geographers at the nation’s center, the pace of geographical knowledge production, which had been more or less business as usual during the war, became feverish from autumn 1918, and continued in this manner during the Károlyi period. Looking in particular at the Hungarian Geographical Society, Győri argues that very little changed in the professional lives of the society’s roughly 1,600 members between the end of October 1918 and March 1919. Encouraged by Károlyi and the looming peace negotiations, geographers (many of them conservative nationalists like Fodor) were in demand, and had a high profile both politically and amongst the general public. Jobs and research, Győri notes, were only really affected once the Republic of Councils was established, but even then the most significant changes occurred amongst the leadership, and not amongst the rank and file of Hungarian geography.³

The speed at which the Hungarian Geographical Society “recovered” after the collapse of the Republic of Councils may suggest that the twin revolutions had little lasting impact on the Society itself, and on Hungarian geography more generally. The pre-revolutionary leadership was rehabilitated just days after the Kun regime fell, and in October

1919 the Society established a committee to investigate the activities of its fellows during the revolutionary period, and to condemn those who may have damaged the interests and honour of Hungarian Geography. Of the Society's 1,600 members, only 10 received serious reprimands, and most members were quickly rehabilitated, many by 1922. Given the need for geographers and geography teachers in the wake of Trianon, it is quite likely that there was no interest in punishing even the most "guilty," as their talents and scientific expertise were required to wage revisionist battles both at home and abroad.⁴ Though the case of the Hungarian Geographical Society is hardly representative, it suggests that the revolutions of 1918 and 1919 may have had a relatively insignificant impact within at least some professional circles during the interwar period.

Of course, as with so many historical events, the political memory and propagandistic legacy of the revolutions of 1918 and 1919 are perhaps more important than their relative significance at the time. Prime fodder for political and ideological messaging during the Horthy era, the discursive utility of these revolutions, and especially the Republic of Councils, has not been lost on Viktor Orbán and his ruling Fidesz party as they continue to transform the historical narrative in "illiberal" Hungary.

Though it is true that the centenary of the Hungarian Republic of Councils was not widely commemorated in Hungary in 2019, the Fidesz government did of course use the opportunity to replace Imre Nagy's popular statue in Martyrs' Square with a memorial to the victims of the Red Terror. Never one to miss a rhetorical opportunity, Orbán included references to 1919 and the Republic of Councils in a number of different speeches leading up to the centenary. Orbán has argued, for example, that there have only been two "true" Hungarian revolutions: 1848 and 1956. Drawing a direct line from these key nineteenth- and twentieth-century national uprisings, Orbán has argued that the changes that Fidesz have made since coming to power with a two-thirds majority in 2010—and especially the Fundamental Laws (*Alaptörvénye*) that entered into force on January 1, 2012—represent a continuation of this revolutionary tradition.⁵

1919, by contrast, was not a Hungarian revolution, nor was it an expression of Hungarians as a "freedom-loving people." According to Orbán, 1919 was a subversive action launched "in the service of foreign interests and foreign ambitions."⁶ Orbán has argued that, like the forces of globalized capital and European Union policies that

supposedly threaten the nation today, Kun's Soviet-backed revolution was designed and promulgated by external enemies bent on weakening the state and creating chaos. Referencing 1919 and the Republic of Councils directly, Orbán stated in a speech given in April 2018 that "Our opponents have no interest in Hungary having a strong and well-functioning government: they want a weak state and a weak government, which carries out the instructions that are sent here."⁷

Of course, from Orbán's point of view, seeds planted by foreign conspirators only flourish in soil made rich by traitors willing to betray their nation and its people. Speaking on June 19, 2018 at the inauguration of the Monument to the Victims of Soviet Occupation, Orbán noted that Hungarians were betrayed not only by the Soviets and the West in 1919 and again after World War II, but also by domestic actors keen on restructuring the nation along foreign lines. The rise of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, he concluded, "teaches us that a treacherous and irresponsible government can lead . . . to the loss of one's country." The memorial to the victims of Soviet oppression, therefore, "imposes the obligation on us to create a Hungary in which similar events can never happen again . . . All unreasonable ideas, confused thoughts, and plans serving foreign interests must be kept outside the country's borders."⁸

Overlaid with images of sinister internationalist intrigue and memories of chaos in the capital (and echoing the scenes depicted in Cécile Tormay's *An Outlaw's Diary*), the combined revolutionary events of 1918 and 1919 have provided Orbán with a propagandistic weapon which, though he may not wield it often, is nevertheless used with discursive precision when he does. Like Prime Minister István Tisza, who is celebrated for having fought to the bitter end to protect his country and who was "martyred" for it, Orbán positions himself as a builder of fences and defender of borders against those "who want to take our homeland from us; [and who] want us to give it to others." Speaking in April 2018 at the inauguration of the Ludovika Campus of the National University of Public Service, Orbán announced proudly that Budapest is one of the world's safest cities, but that "one bad decision, one misguided choice would be enough to render Budapest unrecognizable." Conjuring up images sketched out in graphic detail by Tormay a hundred years earlier of a city ruled by decadent leftists and overrun by a "flood" of degenerate foreigners, Orbán spoke of the need to defend the homeland "from the threats of immigration and the chaotic

situation in Europe.” Making direct reference to the military legacy of the restored Ludovika campus and the role it had played historically as a bastion of state security, Orbán reminded his audience that “Ludovika has always taught its students to see Hungary as an independent, free, and Hungarian country.” It was for this reason that these very same students fought against “those who besieged it in 1919 and . . . those who closed it down after World War II.” Restoring the building and renewing the campus, he concluded, not only revives the city, but also revives “the old spirit” of resistance that will protect the nation from the same sort of internationalist forces that tore it apart in 1918–1919.⁹

NOTES

1. Research for part of this essay has been supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office of Hungary – NKFIH [contract number K 125001].
2. Róbert Győri and Steven Jobbitt, *Fodor Ferenc önéletírásai* [The autobiographical writings of Ferenc Fodor] (Budapest: Eötvös József Collegium, 2016), 89.
3. See Róbert Győri and Charles W. J. Withers, “Trianon and its Aftermath: British Geography and the ‘Dismemberment’ of Hungary, c.1915–c.1922,” *Scottish Geographical Journal* 135, nos. 1–2 (2019): 73–78; and Róbert Győri and Charles W. J. Withers, “Trianon és a brit földrajz I” [‘Trianon and British geography, part I’], *Földrajzi Közlemények* 144, no. 2 (2020): 206–15.
4. See Róbert Győri, “The Communist Leadership of the Hungarian Geographical Society after the Hungarian Soviet Republic, 1919: Sin, Penance, and Absolution,” in *EUGEO Budapest 2015: Congress Programme and Abstracts*, ed. Hungarian Geographical Society (2015): 126–27.
5. See for example “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on 15 March,” March 15, 2016, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-15-march>.
6. *Ibid.*
7. “Viktor Orbán’s speech at the Inauguration of the Ludovika Campus in Budapest,” April 4, 2018, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-ludovika-campus-in-budapest>.

8. “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the inauguration of the Monument to the Victims of Soviet Occupation,” June 19, 2018, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-monument-to-the-victims-of-soviet-occupation>.
9. “Viktor Orbán’s speech at the Inauguration of the Ludovika Campus in Budapest,” April 4, 2018, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-ludovika-campus-in-budapest>.