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Interpretations of the American Revolution in Hungary during the Socialist Regime, 1949–1989

Hungary is located in East-Central Europe, and the historical development of the country had been largely influenced by European great power politics.¹ Consequently, in the training of Hungarian historians, and in Hungarian historiography, great emphasis had been put on the history of the European great powers (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, the Habsburg Empire). Not to mention, that from the 16th century onwards, the country had been integrated into the larger Habsburg Empire, and the history of Hungary could be also interpreted as a series of struggles for independence against the Habsburgs, or at least for a wider autonomy within the Empire. And the end results of these struggles were mainly determined by the actual state of the Habsburg Empire, on the one hand, and the decisions of the other European great powers about these critical situations, on the other. This was the case in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the history of the Kingdom of Hungary was determined by the relationship of the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires, and the affairs of European great power politics. At the beginning of the 18th century, the fate of the Hungarian War for Independence (1703–1711) was also heavily influenced by the end result of the War for the Spanish Succession (1701–1714). Again, the situation was the same in 1848–1849, when the great powers of Europe supported the restoration of the Habsburg Empire, and did not recognize the independence of Hungary. As a result, Hungarian historiography focalized on the history of European great powers and relatively neglected the history of the continents other than Europe. The history of them seemed to be too distant to have a direct impact on the history of Hungary.²

Generally, it was also true for the history of North America and the United States of America before the 20th century, when the United States became one of the most important players in great power politics, and one of the main determinative forces influencing Hungarian history. But before that, and even after it, the number of works concerning American

¹ Szűcs, Jenő, “The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An Outline”, *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 29, 1983, 131–184.

² Kontler, László, *Millennium in Central Europe. A History of Hungary*. Budapest, 1999. [Hereinafter: Kontler, 1999.] 137–259.

history in Hungarian was limited. The colonial era was rarely mentioned, and the American Revolution was only briefly touched. Because of the reasons mentioned above, the impact of the French Revolution and the response to it was much more direct and vigorous in Hungary, as compared to the impact of the American Revolution. This is not to say that the contemporary impact of the latter was fully negligible, but it could influence and inspire only a very limited number of people in the country. The example of the American Revolution became much more vivid and important during the first half of the 19th century, leading to the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence in 1848–1849, but Hungarian reformers and politicians were still inspired and influenced mainly by the examples of France, Britain, and Belgium.³

This situation partly changed after the First World War. For the first time in Hungarian history, the United States emerged as a great power, the influence of which determined the fate of the country after the lost war. Hungarian historians started to pay greater attention to the history of the United States, but the main emphasis was on the later developments of it, and not on the early periods. This was also true for the period of the emergence of the Cold War after the Second World War, when the United States became the number one enemy of the socialist camp, including Hungary.⁴ In this period, the United States was interpreted as the leading imperialist country of the bourgeois camp, but Marxist-Leninist scholars throughout the socialist camp had to give an explanation how the United States could emerge into such a position. As a result, they also had to say something about the birth of the American republic. This was true for the Hungarian historians too, who were also trying to fit the interpretation of the American Revolution into the framework of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

There were two major phases of the interpretation of the American Revolution in Marxist-Leninist historiography in this period in Hungary. First, evaluations published in the 1950s and the early 1960s had strictly to follow the Marxist-Leninist interpre-

³ Závodszy, Géza, *American Effects on Hungarian Imagination and Political Thought, 1559–1848*. Highland Lakes, New Jersey, 1995. 13–205.; Singerts, Jonathan, *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy*. Charlottesville, London, 2022.

⁴ Lévai, Csaba, “Az amerikai prezentista-relativista történetírók (Charles A. Beard és Carl L. Becker) megítélése Magyarországon a Kádár-rendszer időszakában” [The Assessment of American Presentist-Relativist Historians (Charles A. Beard and Carl L. Becker) in Hungary During the Kádár Regime], In: Erős, Vilmos, Takács, Ádám (ed.), *Tudomány és ideológia között. Tanulmányok az 1945 utáni magyar történetírásról*. Budapest, 2012. 112–133.

tation of the great historical event, which was based on the Marxist evaluation of the French Revolution. Second, due to détente and the improving relations of the Soviet bloc and the United States, a softened version of the Marxist-Leninist interpretation was allowed to evolve from the second half of the 1960s. It is worthy to note, that it was also true for the whole period of the socialist regime, that the interpretation of the American Revolution was still not a central problem of Hungarian historiography. As a result, there were no essential debates about it, and no alternative interpretations of it emerged within the framework of Marxist-Leninist scholarship. A softened version of this interpretation could evolve from the second half of the 1960s, but it remained within the framework of Marxist-Leninist interpretation, officially. It is also important to add that this softened version was allowed to evolve by the responsible plenums of the Communist Party.

By the year of 1949 the Communist Party took power in Hungary and from the beginning of the 1950s it was forbidden to publish such evaluations of the American Revolution, which did not strictly follow the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the great event. The problem of Marxist historians was that it was not easy to fit the American Revolution in the framework of the official Marxist-Leninist theory of revolution. Was it, similar to the French Revolution, a “bourgeois revolution” which destroyed feudalism and created the preconditions of capitalist development, or was it the “first anti-colonialist uprising”?⁵ But there was no feudalism in North America in the European sense of the word, so there was no *ancien regime* [old regime] to bring down. And if it was fundamentally a movement for independence led by colonial bourgeoisie to make them free from the patronage of the British capitalists, what kind of role did the mass of the working people play in it?⁶

It was not easy for the Marxist-Leninist historians to answer these questions, since the “classics” of the theory rarely mentioned the problem of the American Revolution and made only very general and passing remarks. Soviet and Hungarian Marxist-Leninist authors usually quoted the very general evaluation of Lenin, according to which the American people “were fighting one of the first and greatest wars for liberation,

⁵ Foster, William Z., *Az amerikai földrész rövid politikai története*. [A Brief Political History of the American Continent] Budapest, 1952. 144.

⁶ Solti, László, *1787. Az amerikai történetírás évszázados vitájának újabb állomásai*. [1787: New Milestones in the Century-Long Debate of American Historiography] Budapest, 1985. [Hereinafter: Solti, 1985.] 7–9.

one of the rare really revolutionary wars in the history of mankind”.⁷ As a result, Marxist-Leninist historians of the 20th century did not have firm ideological foundations on which they could have built their interpretations. Nevertheless, Marxist historians could find solutions to these dilemmas, mainly by the help of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution.⁸ According to it, the Jacobins represented the most progressive political movement, since they endeavored to destroy the structure of feudalism the most consistently. But the moderate bourgeoisie became terrified of the active political role of the working people and they brought down the regime of the Jacobins, and by the help of this reactionary turn they could consolidate the capitalist rule.⁹ In the case of the American Revolution Marxist historians considered Shays’ Rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786–1787 as the culmination of the revolutionary political activity of the masses, which terrified the moderate bourgeoisie. The counter-revolutionary reaction of them was the forcing of the new federal constitution on the masses, by the help of which they could consolidate their rule.¹⁰

This opinion was represented by a two-volume history of the United States written by Soviet authors in the late 1950s, which was published in Hungarian in 1964. The author of much of the chapter about the American Revolution was A. A. Fursenko, while N. N. Bolhovitinov wrote the part discussing the relationship of Russia and the United States during the War for Independence. According to Fursenko: “*Shays’ Rebellion indicated the height of the democratic movement after the war. It showed to the ruling classes how dissatisfied the masses were with the results of the war, in which victory was secured by the heroic efforts and self-sacrifice of the latter. The war and the follow-up setback of the economy resulted in misery and pauperization of the farmers, artisans, and the working-class people, on the one hand, and favored the economic strengthening of the bourgeoisie and the planter class, on the oth-*

⁷ Lenin, Vlagyimir Iljics, *Összes művei. 38. kötet.* [Collected Works. Volume 38.] Budapest, 1973. 335. All translations from Hungarian were made by the author.

⁸ Mathiez, Albert, *A francia forradalom.* [The French Revolution] Budapest, 1957.; Lefebvre, Georges, *The Coming of the French Revolution.* Princeton, 1947.; Soboul, Albert, *A francia forradalom története 1789–1799.* [The History of the French Revolution, 1789–1799] Budapest, 1989.

⁹ Soboul, 1989. 235–242.; Furet, François, *Gondoljuk újra a francia forradalmat.* [Rethinking the French Revolution] Pécs, 1994. 89–129.

¹⁰ Solti, 1985. 9

er.”¹¹ Fursenko described the federal constitution of 1787 as “a great step backward as compared to the *Declaration of Independence* and several state constitutions especially those of Pennsylvania”.¹² The approach of the Soviet Marxist historians to the American Revolution was essentially positive, since they considered it fundamentally a progressive event in the history of mankind, which after all established a pure capitalist economy and society in the United States, and, in this sense, created the pre-conditions for the socialist revolution. This is the reason why they added in respect of the federal constitution that “*in the context of the period, and especially after the adoption of the Bill of Rights, we could consider it a progressive document... America showed the world in those days how to wage a revolutionary war, as it was pointed out by Lenin, and here lays the real importance of the war for independence from the point of view of the progress of history.*”¹³ To sum it up, the American Revolution had a great impact on the revolutionary events in France and on the wars for independence in Latin America, and in this way contributed to the great struggle against feudalism and for the consolidation of a capitalist society and economy, led by the progressive bourgeoisie.

A long summary of American historiography had been also attached to this history of the United States written by Soviet Marxist-Leninist scholars. From the different schools of American historiography, the approach of the progressive historians and especially of Charles A. Beard (1874–1948) proved to be the closest to their interpretation. No wonder that Soviet historians applauded the approach of Beard and those of the other “economic historians”. Nevertheless, they also heavily criticized the interpretation of progressive scholars who “*use such terms as class struggle, property, etc. in a wrong way, and their interpretation of these terms is not in accordance with the correct, scientific Marxist definition of these concepts.*” According to the Soviet authors, the progressive historians “*were able to call the attention to the economic conflicts which provided the economic basis of the struggle between the colonies and the mother country at the end of the 18th century, and they pointed out the restrictions which were imposed upon the colonies concerning the functioning of manufacture, commerce etc... But one should also take into account that according to the representatives of the economic school, the political behavior of the social classes had been determined not by class interests,*

¹¹ Soviet authors, *Az Egyesült Államok története I-II. kötet.* [History of the United States, Volumes I–II.] Budapest, 1964. [Hereinafter: Soviet authors] 80.

¹² Soviet authors, I. 89.

¹³ Soviet authors, I. 89–90.

but by the selfish and narrow-minded interests of individuals, the characteristics of which are the eternal features of human nature."¹⁴ Not to mention that according to them, Beard gave up his progressive ideas by the end of the Second World War.¹⁵

It means that the Soviet authors applauded unequivocally the works only of those American historians who were the members of the Communist Party, or who openly declared themselves as Marxists. Although he was not a historian such a person was William Z. Foster (1881–1961) who was the leader of the Communist Party of the United States of America in the 1920s and again after 1945, and who was the presidential candidate of the party in 1924, 1928, and 1932. Foster was a loyal supporter of the leadership of the Soviet Union during the 1950s and he died in Moscow. Several of his works were published in the 1950s in Hungary.¹⁶ One of them was a book entitled *Short Political History of the American Continent* which was published in 1952. According to him, a great revolutionary movement was observable on the American continent between the middle of the 18th century and 1837. The "*essence of this great movement was the revolutionary attack against the feudal system, this was an all-American bourgeois, that is capitalist revolution*".¹⁷ In this sense, he also deemed the American Revolution a progressive movement in the history of mankind, since it was "*the next, more developed phase in the harsh struggle of mankind from barbarity towards socialism*".¹⁸ It was also a war for independence "*on the part of the emerging American capitalist class, to throw off the foreign oppressors, the parasitic European governments, and the exploiting classes, bloodsucking the colonial world*". The revolution was headed by "*the coalition of Northern merchants and industrialists, and Southern planters... but a great role was also played by the workers and the farmers*".¹⁹

The communist politician also interpreted the role of the ratification of the federal constitution of 1787 very similarly to the Soviet historians.

¹⁴ Soviet authors, II. 390.

¹⁵ Soviet authors, II. 393.

¹⁶ Foster, William Z., *A kapitalizmus alkonya*. [The Twilight of Capitalism] Budapest, 1950a.; Foster, William Z., *Lapok egy munkás életéből*. [Pages from a Worker's Life] Budapest, 1950b.; Foster, William Z., *Az amerikai földrész rövid politikai története*. [A Brief Political History of the American Continent] Budapest, 1952. [Hereinafter: Foster, 1952.]; Foster, William Z., *Az Egyesült Államok Kommunista Pártjának története*. [The History of the Communist Party of the United States] Budapest, 1953.

¹⁷ Foster, 1952. 143.

¹⁸ Foster, 1952. 144.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Unlike them, Foster did not refer to Shays' Rebellion directly, but he mentioned "*the outbreak of some rebellions, popular struggles, independent from the direction of the liberal bourgeoisie and the planters*".²⁰ The ratification of the new constitution was a reactionary turn of the ruling classes, in order to restrict the suffrage to the "*proprietary classes, the definite interest of which was the exploitation of the workers*".²¹ It is worthy to note that Foster's book was full of factual errors. According to him, the first permanent English settlement in Virginia, Jamestown was founded in 1606 and not in 1607, George Washington was the richest plantation owner in the colonies before the American Revolution, and Crispus Attucks, the mulatto victim of the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770 was a slave escaping from the South.²² According to the evaluation of the Soviet authors of the two volume history of the United States, Foster "*exposed the forms and methods of the exploitation of the masses. He pointed out that the state serves the interest of the monopolies, and expounded the development of state monopolistic capitalism, and analyzed the real characteristics of the economic crises*".²³

From the point of view of the historiography of the American Revolution, the works of Herbert Aptheker (1915–2003) played an even more important role. Like many young intellectuals of his generation, he joined the Communist Party in 1939. He served in the United States Army during the Second World War and reached the rank of major by 1945. However, Aptheker suffered from the effects of McCarthyism in the 1950s. Although he had a Ph. D. from Columbia University, he was unable to obtain a full-time appointment as a university lecturer in this period. Aptheker fought against Cold War anticommunism, testifying on behalf of Communist Party officials facing persecution in these years.²⁴ Nevertheless, he could publish such path-breaking work as *American Negro Slave Revolts*, which were among the first scholarly efforts to discuss the role African Americans had played in the American Revolution, and to summarize the history of the resistance of them against slavery.²⁵ He remained loyal to the communist movement even after Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism in 1956. In his *The Truth about Hungary* he publicly de-

²⁰ Foster, 1952. 145.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Foster, 1952. 147, 152, 157.

²³ Soviet authors, II. 399.

²⁴ Kelley, Robin D.G., "Interview of Herbert Aptheker", *The Journal of American History* 87, 2000, 151–167.

²⁵ Aptheker, Herbert, "American Negro Slave Revolts", *Science and Society* 1, 1937, 512–538.; Aptheker, Herbert, *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York, 1943.

fended the Soviet Union's subsequent suppression of the Hungarian anti-communist uprising in the same year.²⁶ And Aptheker also defended the intervention of the armies of the socialist countries in Czechoslovakia in 1968 in a pamphlet entitled *Czechoslovakia and Counterrevolution: Why the Socialist Countries Intervened*.²⁷ As Peter Novick noted, “[i]n the United States the leading Communist historian, Herbert Aptheker, produced the party’s official defense of Soviet tanks assaulting Hungarian workers”.²⁸ His behavior was in stark contrast to the actions of his famous British Communist colleagues Christopher Hill (1912–2003) and Edward P. Thompson (1924–1993), who left the Communist Party of Great Britain after 1956.²⁹ As Susan Armeny pointed out: “*The historian who celebrated slave revolts in the Americas opposed freedom for the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe... Let us honor Aptheker’s pioneering work in African American history and his devotion to equality for African Americans. But let us condemn his support for the policies of the Soviet Union and of the international movement it dominated as antithetical to the cause of freedom and justice Aptheker himself profess.*”³⁰

However, the Soviet authors applauded the works of Aptheker which “*describes the struggle of the negro slaves for their liberation*”, and who “*unmasked the reactionary feature of present day concepts of bourgeois historiography*”.³¹ Aptheker also penned a 47-page long booklet entitled *The Negro in the American Revolution*, which was praised by the authors of the Soviet history of the United States, and which was one of the first efforts to explore the role African Americans played in the American Revolution.³² This work and also his other study about the slave revolts had been published in Hungarian in 1953 in a volume entitled *Excerpts from the History of the American Negro People*. According to the foreword of this volume, the Hungarian publication “*strengthens the broader front of the struggle against American*

²⁶ Aptheker, Herbert, *The Truth about Hungary*. New York, 1957.

²⁷ Aptheker, Herbert, *Czechoslovakia and Counterrevolution: Why the Socialist Countries Intervened?* New York, 1969.

²⁸ Novick, Peter, *That Noble Dream. The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge, 1995. [Hereinafter: Novick, 1995.] 422.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Armeny, Susan, “Letter to the Editor”, *Journal of American History* 87, 2000, 1176–1177.

³¹ Soviet authors, II. 405.

³² Aptheker, Herbert, *The Negro in the American Revolution*. New York, 1940.; Soviet authors, II. 404.

imperialism".³³ The American historian was talking about the first American Revolution, since he thought that only the victory of the North in the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery, which he termed the second American Revolution, created the conditions of a pure capitalist development in the United States. Aptheker did not declare the American Revolution an "*early bourgeois revolution*" openly, but his interpretation was close to this explanation, since he stated that it was only the first step towards the foundation of a pure capitalist economy and society. In this sense, his evaluation is close to the interpretation of Soviet historians. According to him the American Revolution committed itself against the aristocracy, separated the state and the church, declared the self-determination of the nation, fought against the vestiges of feudalism, and promised liberty and equality.³⁴

Textbooks for university students also reflected the official Marxist-Leninist interpretation, of course. *World History, 1500–1789* by Tibor Wittman, written in the 1960s, is a good example. In this work Wittman, the excellent pioneer historian of Latin-America in Hungary, declared that at the beginning of the American Revolution the "revolutionary class alliance of revolutionary democrats (Jefferson, Samuel Adams, etc.), the liberal bourgeoisie (Franklin etc.), and the planters (Washington etc.), supported by the people, introduced terror against the English and the counter-revolutionary loyalist forces. This alliance was transitional, of course. "*The liberal, profit-seeking bourgeoisie and the planter class, who were afraid of the people, started to monopolize power in the second half of the revolutionary struggle. The people tried to defend "their lands and liberty" under the leadership of captain Shays, and this uprising forced the "bourgeoisie and the planter class to realize the commonness of their class interests."* They came to the conclusion that "*for the sake of the subordination of the people and the defense of the interests of the capitalists, a stronger state administration was needed.*" As a result, the new federal constitution of 1787 defended the "*economic rights only of the businessmen, the speculators, and the slave holders.*" The evaluation of Wittman was also very similar to those of the Soviet authors. According to him: "*despite the anti-democratic features of it, the victory of the United States, its social and political structure had a great influence on the progressive forces of Europe, especially in France, and it supported the bourgeoisie in*

³³ Aptheker, Herbert, *Az amerikai négek történetéből*. [From the History of African Americans] Budapest, 1953. [Hereinafter: Aptheker, 1953.] 6.

³⁴ Aptheker, 1953. 65.

its struggle against feudal absolutism... It also made clear that social progress is not the exclusive monopoly of European capitalist nations. Besides its impact on world economy, here lies the historical importance of the event."³⁵ Wittman's textbook went through sixteen printings up to the late 1980s, when it was still in use.

University textbooks clearly reflect Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the American Revolution such as the more ambitious project of László Solti, who published a work about the historiography of the birth of the federal constitution of 1787 in 1985. Solti was a professional historian, who published many studies also for the wider audience. He wrote many history lectures about various topics for the Hungarian State Radio Company, for example. The impact of his works was twofold. On the one hand, he insisted on the validity of old Marxist-Leninist interpretations, and criticized heavily the explanations of the non-Marxist American historians, but in doing so, he also displayed the views of some non-Marxist schools of American historiography, on the other. In 1959, Solti published a very early review of the debate about the work of Beard, and progressive historians in the 1950s. He fundamentally criticized the "presentist-relativist" approach of Beard and Carl L. Becker (1873–1945), but his report on this debate in itself was a significant account of one of the important developments of American historiography, only two years after the repression of the revolt in 1956.³⁶ In his book he published in 1985, his clear aim was to adapt the history of the American Revolution to the requirements of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory through the critical analysis of American historiography. As he stated in the preface, the aim of his work was "*to investigate the problem, to what extent the process and the internal dynamics of the American Revolution has something in common with the dynamics of the other great bourgeois revolutions*".³⁷ Unsurprisingly, he came to the conclusion that there were common dynamics of all bourgeois revolutions described by the founding theorists of Marxism-Leninism, and the American Revolution was not an exception at all. Which were the main characteristics of this common dynamism? According to Solti: the "*radical movements of the people without property and of the petit bourgeois played a significant role in*

³⁵ Wittman Tibor, *Egyetemes történet, 1500–1789*. [Universal History, 1500–1789] Budapest, 1989. 162–167.

³⁶ Solti, László, "Az amerikai történetírás néhány kérdéséről" [On Some Questions of American Historiography], *Századok* 92, 1958, 465–474.

³⁷ Solti, 1985. 7.

*the American Revolution, although the intensity and the political results of these movements were not as spectacular as in the French Revolution... As a result of the one-sided economic policy of the ruling classes, the enormous tax burden, the extensive indebtedness, the confiscation of property, the imprisonment of the farmers etc., a clear decline in the economic position of the small owners was observable.”*³⁸

The masses responded with the Shays’ Rebellion, which was followed by movements of the workers and the farmers in other states. “No wonder that, according to the interests of the bourgeoisie and the large landowners, the rapid and urgent political consolidation became the number one aspiration of the ruling classes”.³⁹ This reactionary goal had been achieved by the ratification of the new federal constitution. In the eyes of Solti, a similar scenario could be observable in the French Revolution, since the rule of the Jacobins was followed by the reactionary regime of the Thermidor Convent and Napoleon Bonaparte. The ruling classes in both countries did “*what was allowed to them by the historical and social conditions, what was the actual historical task of them, to consolidate the rule of the bourgeoisie, endangered by the overflowing of revolutionary activity*”.⁴⁰ It means that this reactionary setback which was observable in both bourgeois revolutions was the result of the very nature and the internal logic of all bourgeois revolutions, including the American one. Solti did not deny that there were clear differences between the two events. The most important difference is that in France the bourgeoisie was forced to apply “*sadistic and bloody methods*” to restore capitalist order, while in the United States it was enough to use methods of constitutional lawmaking. But, according to Solti, the essential dynamics of the two revolutions were the same.⁴¹

Solti analyzed the works of the different schools of American historiography from this point of view. No wonder that he preferred the economic interpretation of the progressive historians, especially that of Charles A. Beard, but he also praised the works of such scholars as John Franklin Jameson (1859–1937) or Elisha P. Douglass (1916–2001). He noted that the works of the progressive historians are not perfect. Nevertheless, “*they made a significant step towards the integration of the analyses of the American Revolution into the general framework*

³⁸ Solti, 1985. 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Solti, 1985. 9.

⁴¹ Ibid.

*of the investigation of all bourgeois revolutions, and towards calling attention to the fact that the American Revolution is not excepted from some general tendencies of the internal dynamics of all bourgeois revolutions”.*⁴² Solti heavily criticized such schools of American historiography as the “*consensus school*” of the 1950s, or the representatives of the “*republican synthesis*” in the 1960s and 1970s. However, through his criticism of the studies by American historians of the 1950s and 1960s, Hungarian audiences could at least obtain information about the work of such well-known American historians of the revolutionary era as Louis Hartz (1919–1986), Daniel Boorstin (1914–2004), Edmund S. Morgan (1916–2013), Carl N. Degler (1921–2014), Bernard Bailyn (1922–2020), Gordon S. Wood (1933–), or Jack P. Greene (1931–).⁴³

No doubt that the Marxist-Leninist approach remained the official interpretation of the American Revolution in Hungary up to the collapse of the socialist regime at the end of the 1980s. Nevertheless, a gradual change within this interpretative framework was observable mainly from the second half of the 1960s on. There were three main factors behind this development: First, the clearly observable change in the domestic politics of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, as the Communist Party was renamed in 1956, after the successful consolidation of the regime under the leadership of János Kádár (1912–1989) after the suppression of the revolution in 1956. Second, the international détente, namely the changing policy of the Soviet Union and the United States towards each other, and towards the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Third, the spectacular improvement of American-Hungarian relations due to the conditions mentioned above. Regarding the change in the domestic politics of the Communist Party, the 1956 revolt was a great lesson also for the leaders of it. They wanted to avoid a second uprising at almost any price, and this was also in the fundamental interest of the Soviet Union. János Kádár, who became the leader of the Communist Party because of the Soviet intervention in 1956, was imposed upon Hungary by the Soviets. The retribution after the defeat of the uprising was cruel and brutal and Kádár was considered by most ordinary Hungarians “the butcher of the nation” in the second half of the 1950s. But he also realized that the Communist Party had to change its policy, and the Communist Party started to lay much greater emphasis on the standard of living of the people, in order to gain the support at least of some segments of Hungarian society, and there

⁴² Solti, 1985. 21, 31.

⁴³ Solti, 1985. 108–151.

was a real and significant improvement in this respect in the second half of the 1960s and in the 1970s. As a result of some economic reforms, there was also an increase in the productivity of the economy, and Hungarian agriculture became the food supplier of the other socialist countries. Many Hungarians accepted and supported this new policy because they compared it to the dogmatic Stalinism of the 1950s and to the situation in some other socialist countries, where shortage of food was still the part of everyday life. By the end of the 1960s, Kádár evolved to the position of the beneficial “*uncle or father of the nation*”.⁴⁴

A somewhat more liberal cultural policy was an integral part of this new line. American authors, who criticized contemporary American society, for example the books of the sociologists C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) or David Reisman (1909–2002) and works which were indifferent from an ideological point of view, had been allowed to be published. And this was also true for the products of the American film industry. Such American movies were displayed in Hungary as *Easy Rider* or *Hair*. In the eyes of many Hungarians this was a radical change which was in sharp contrast with the almost complete ban of the 1950s.⁴⁵

During the years of the Cold War the American republic became the leading power of the “free world” and, as a result, gradually emerged to the position of a positive example and the symbol of those values, which were inaccessible for the Hungarians under communist rule. Due to the oppressed position of the people and the serious lack of information Hungarians, started to develop a fundamentally positive and highly idealized picture of the United States, which was in sharp contrast with the official communist propaganda of the 1950s according to which Coca Cola, for example was a dangerous drug by the help of which bourgeois imperialists keep the American youth under control. The relevance of the American Revolution did not play a significant role during the anti-communist insurrection in 1956, since the rebels considered the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849 as their prime example. The United States did not help the Hungarian freedom fighters directly, and the defeat of the revolt was followed by some kind of disappointment with the United States. But by the end of the 1960s, America became the embodiment of the free world for many of the Hungarians again, despite the official anti-American propaganda in connection with the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. Communist propagandists argued the crisis of American

⁴⁴ Kontler, 1999. 430–454.

⁴⁵ Kontler, 1999. 445–448.

capitalism and the anti-democratic nature of the American political system. But for many Hungarians under communist rule the protest against the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States were not the signs of the final crisis of American capitalism, but the expressions of a democratic society in which one can protest legally with the hope of success for his or her rights. And from the Hungarian perspective, the social and material welfare enjoyed by the “*oppressed and exploited*” average white Americans was almost unthinkable. Many young Hungarians opposed the Vietnam War and the inhuman treatment of African American demonstrators sincerely, but not simply because they supported their government in condemning the “*imperialist and racist*” policy of the American government, but because they also felt themselves oppressed by their own government and the Soviet Union. And they were also eager to own at least some pieces of the material welfare which was inaccessible for them in a socialist country.⁴⁶

In Western Europe Coca Cola and McDonalds became the symbols of American imperialism and political and military hegemony. But in Hungary they were considered as the small pieces of the free world. From this perspective they proved to be really very important events when Coca Cola became available in Hungary at the end of the 1960s and the first McDonald fast food restaurant was opened in Budapest in 1986, four years before the first free parliamentary elections. Some Hungarian young people may have been disappointed that Coca Cola is not a serious drug, but it was very good for them to know that they had the opportunity to drink the same drink with Elvis Presley, and other American pop and rock stars. The same was true of American pop and rock music the imitation of which by Hungarian bands was partly an effort to establish an alternative culture to the official socialist entertainment industry.⁴⁷

The second important factor behind the changing interpretation of the American Revolution in Hungary was the changing relationship of the Soviet Union and the United States from the 1960s onwards. The result of it was the changing policy of the United States towards the satellite states of Eastern Europe. In contrast to its former aims, American foreign policy gave up the policy of destabilization of the satel-

⁴⁶ Sebestyén, Annamária, “A hatalom és az ifjúság a hatvanas évek Magyarországon” [Power and Youth in 1960s Hungary], In: Szabó, Máté (ed.), *1968 tiltakozási hulláma fél évszázad visszfényében*. Budapest, 2021. 230–249.; Glant, Tibor, *A Szent Korona amerikai kalandja és hazatérése*. Debrecen, 2018. [Hereinafter: Glant, 2018.] 121–126.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

lite regimes but wanted to stabilize and consolidate them from the middle of the 1960s on. Foreign policy makers in Washington accepted the permanent presence of the Soviet Union in East-Central-Europe and they wanted to preserve the stability of Europe under such conditions. They thought that the possible pullout of the Soviet Union from East-Central-Europe would lead to the destabilization of the European balance of power and the re-emergence of the influence of Germany in the region. It would also lead to the resurgence of the conflicting nationalism of the region. Consequently, the United States changed its policy towards the satellite regimes of Eastern Europe and initiated economic and cultural cooperation and exchange programs. The American government also supported the granting of loans to these regimes, and these loans started to play an increasingly significant role in the financing of some of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe.⁴⁸

The third important factor behind the changing interpretation of the American Revolution in socialist Hungary was the significant and spectacular improvement of American-Hungarian relations from the middle of the 1960s. Partly as a result of the pressure of the American government, the Hungarian government announced an extensive, but not full amnesty for the participants of the 1956 revolt, who were still in prison. The Hungarian government realized the slowing-down of the extensive economic growth of the country, and they needed technology transfers from the well-developed countries of the Western world, to give a new impetus to the economy. As a result, socialist Hungary was also interested in the improvement of the relationships with the United States, with international détente in the background. One of the first signs of this new line was the restoration of the diplomatic relations on the ambassadorial level between the two nations in 1966. It was followed by the settling of the status of Cardinal József Mindszenty (1892–1975), who had fled to the American Embassy after the collapse of the revolution in 1956. Mindszenty was pardoned by the Hungarian government, Pope Paul VI forced him to abdicate, and he was allowed to leave the building of the American Embassy and the country in 1971. These developments were followed in 1973

⁴⁸ Borhi, László, *Nagyhatalmi érdekek háójában: az Egyesült Államok és Magyarország kapcsolata a második világháborútól a rendszerváltásig*. [In the Web of Great Power Interests: Relations Between the United States and Hungary from World War II to the Regime Change] Budapest, 2015. [Hereinafter: Borhi, 2015.]; Borhi, László, *Dealing with Dictators: The United States, Hungary and East Central Europe, 1942–1989*. Bloomington, 2016. [Hereinafter: Borhi, 2016.]

by an agreement on compensation for American property nationalized in Hungary after World War II. The Holy Crown of Saint Stephen, the symbol of Hungarian sovereignty, was captured by the American troops as a war booty at the end of World War II, but the Carter administration decided to restore it to Hungary in 1978. One year later a chair in Hungarian Studies was established at Indiana University (Bloomington), which was sponsored partly by the Hungarian government.⁴⁹

One of the side effects of this new policy was the emergence of a somewhat new interpretation of the American Revolution in Hungary. Works of the historians were strictly censored in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. External censorship endured, but became somewhat milder, and the number of taboo topics like the retaliation after 1956, or the treatment of the Hungarian civil population by some soldiers of the Red Army during World War II, decreased. Besides that, authors also developed some kind of internal censorship, not to touch such topics could be considered intolerable by the regime. Historians were permitted to put greater emphasis on the drama of the American colonists' experiences and the sensational campaigns of the War for Independence, provided the studies remained within a more broadly interpreted Marxist-Leninist framework. In some cases, especially during the 1980s, this simply meant that they attached quotations from one of the classics of Marxism-Leninism to their texts, showing that they follow the official interpretation of the given event.

The thin volumes of Ervin Szuhay-Havas are good examples of this revised approach. The title of his first book published in 1969 was the *Heroic Age of America* and it was about the history of the mainland British colonies in North America, but he also attached a brief survey of the American Revolution to his work. The author followed Marxist-Leninist interpretations, but in a more sophisticated manner. In his opinion the American Revolution was a war for independence, a colonial revolt, and a social revolution at the same time. It was a war for independence which led to the founding of an independent new state. But it was undoubtedly the first “*successful colonial revolt of a small nation*,” which set an example to such modern political developments as the movement of the “*non-aligned nations*” of the Third World. “*But was it also a revolution? Yes, of course. The Founding Fathers, the members of the Continental Congress inflamed the torch of the revolution in the New World, and they could rise to power with the help of an effusive popular movement. But after victory they were ready to restrain the move-*

⁴⁹ Kontler, 1985. 430–468.; Borhi, 2015.; Borhi, 2016.; Glant, 2018.

ment of the tens and thousands of armed ordinary people.” The leaders of the young American republic reacted with violence to the claims of the participants in Shays’ Rebellion. For Szuhay-Havas Shays’ Rebellion represented the eruption of the revolutionary activity of the people. According to him, the American Revolution “*was a struggle for independence, a colonial war, and a revolution, the result of which was not a popular government.*” It means that the dynamics of the American Revolution were like that of the French Revolution according to Szuhay-Havas. The only difference was that in America the popular movement was not strong enough to come into power, and the “*bourgeoisie of the ‘Thermidor Directory’ could keep the power firmly in his hands throughout the revolution*”. Accordingly, quoting the evaluation of Karl Marx, Szuhay-Havas declared the federal constitution a “*typical bourgeois-patrician*” document.⁵⁰

The book of Szuhay-Havas was written for a wider audience. Consequently, it was full of interesting details concerning the daily life of the colonists, or the relation of the white settlers and the Native Americans. It is funny that in spite of its clear commitment to Marxism, the book also included many elements of the interpretation of the American historians of the 1950s. The members of the highly anti-communist consensus school argued the exceptional feature of the historical development of the United States.⁵¹ Paradoxically, this interpretation was in many respects in accord with the Marxist approach in the sense that Marxist scholars also emphasized some differences of American and European history in order to be able to explain the special features of their “*early bourgeois revolution.*” Szuhay-Havas also published a thin volume about the Civil War in 1965, and at the bicentenary of American independence a short book about the history of the American Revolution in 1976.⁵²

⁵⁰ Szuhay-Havas, Ervin, *Amerika hőskora*. [The Heroic Age of America] Budapest, 1969. 320–321, 324.

⁵¹ Kraus, Michael, and Joyce, Davis D., *The Writing of American History*. Norman, 1990. 311–335.; Novick, Peter, *That Noble Dream. The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge, 1995. 281–414.; Lévai, Csaba, “American historiography in the 1950s: the case of Daniel J. Boorstin”, In. Bollobás, Enikő and Nagy, Szilvia (ed.), *Proceedings of the 2003 Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies*. Budapest, 2005. 183–187.

⁵² Szuhay-Havas, Ervin, *Kék-szürke tragédia. Az amerikai polgárháború története*. [Blue-Gray Tragedy: The History of the American Civil War] Budapest, 1966. [Hereinafter: Szuhay-Havas, 1966.]; Szuhay-Havas Ervin, *Tizenhárom csillag*. [Thirteen Stars] Budapest, 1976. [Hereinafter: Szuhay-Havas, 1976.]

As compared to the other Marxist scholars mentioned above, in his book about the American Revolution he emphasized the complexity of the historical event. For example, he wanted to explain to his readers why some rich bourgeois decided to support independence and why some others remained loyal to the British Crown? He called the attention of the Hungarian public for the first time to the fact that the American Revolution was also a civil war. However, his conclusion was pretty much the same as in his earlier book: The reactionary bourgeoisie supported the strengthening of the federal government after the destruction of the Shays' Rebellion, and they imposed upon the people the new federal constitution. For Szuhay-Havas the American Revolution represented the "*third level in the history of bourgeois revolutions, after the rebellion of the Netherlands and the English Revolution. This was the first in which religious issues did not play significant role... The classics of Marxism-Leninism were fully aware of the fact that the American Revolution was an early bourgeois revolution.*" But, quoting Lenin he also added that it was a progressive event of human history, since "*this was one of the rare really revolutionary wars in the history of mankind*".⁵³ The volumes of Ervin Szuhay-Havas became clearly outdated. They not only reflected the official Marxist-Leninist ideology, but the author was rarely aware of the important changes that occurred in the historical interpretation of the colonial era and the revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not simply the fault of the author, of course. According to the blurb on the cover, the book was "*published on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the United States*".⁵⁴ It should be noted that Szuhay-Havas's book was published by the official publishing house of party documents and the writings of the leaders of the Communist Party. By the publication of a volume celebrating the bicentennial of American independence the communist leaders of Hungary probably wanted to make a gesture. In this sense the publication of Szuhay-Havas's volume corresponded with the new policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.

It is also important to note that Ervin Szuhay-Havas was not a professional historian, but an author with very good writing skills, who mainly published books about interesting topics for a wider audience. The first professional historian who played significant role in this new trend of historiography was Aladár Urbán (1929–2019). At the zenith of his professional career, he was full professor at the Loránd Eötvös

⁵³ Szuhay-Havas, 1976. 265.

⁵⁴ Szuhay-Havas, 1976. blurb.

University of Budapest, which is traditionally considered the most prestigious university of the country, and he was acclaimed as a leading authority of the Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence in 1848–1849. Urbán started to do research concerning the impact of the American Revolution on the political thought of such leaders of the Hungarian Revolution as Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), and, as a result, he also started to study the American Revolution. He was one of the first Hungarian historians who could spend ten months in the United States in 1973–1974 with the help of an agreement about cultural exchange between the Hungarian and the American governments. With the help of the Ford Foundation, approximately 20–25 Hungarian experts per year were allowed to visit American universities after 1964. The emergence of these exchange programs was another sign of the changing political relations of the two countries.⁵⁵

As Aladár Urbán recalled in an interview in 2009, “[i]t was not easy to do serious research regarding Western Europe or America at these times... travel was difficult, and as a result, it was impossible to establish really serious academic contacts”.⁵⁶ He was planning to write his so-called academic doctorate about the impact of the ideas of the American Revolution on the leaders of the Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence in 1848–1849, but the Academic Evaluation Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences did not deem it as a topic suitable to get the degree, which was the highest academic degree in Hungary at that time. Under such conditions, Urbán decided to give up American history as his main field of interest, and returned to Hungarian history.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, he could do fundamental work regarding the popularization of early American history in Hungary. He wrote several articles about the history of the American Revolution for Hungarian newspapers and magazines, including *Népszabadság* (Freedom of the People), the official daily organ of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. He did not only popularize the topic of the American Revolution, but he also published some scholarly works regarding the great event. He edited and published a volume in 1981 entitled *Documents for the Study of the History of the United States*,

⁵⁵ Pelyach, István, “Egy életpálya vonzásában. (Összeállításunkkal köszöntjük Urbán Aladár történést 80. születésnapján)” [In the Orbit of a Life’s Career. (With this compilation, we greet the historian Aladár Urbán on the occasion of his 80th birthday)], *Aetas* 24, 2009, 175–180. [Hereinafter: Pelyach, 2009.]

⁵⁶ Pelyach, 2009. 177.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

1774–1918. It contained the first Hungarian translations of many of the fundamental documents of the period of the American Revolution, such as the *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms*, or *The Treaty of Alliance with France* and many others.⁵⁸

Urbán also published the classic work of Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, in Hungarian in 1988. The main cause of the publication of Beard's book was the bicentennial of the constitutional convention in Philadelphia in 1787. The publication of this work was a good example of the changing political climate of the second half of the 1980s. Beard's approach was relatively close to the official Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the American Revolution and was fundamentally applauded by Marxist historians in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, it was also clear that his evaluation of the ratification of the federal constitution was not totally identical with that of the Marxist scholars. Consequently, the publication of Beard's original text was a very important development from the point of view of the emergence of a more balanced picture of the American Revolution in Hungary. Not to mention that the book contained a foreword by Forrest McDonald (1927–2016) the noted non-Marxist American historian of the Founding period, who was one of the best living American experts on the topic, and who heavily criticized Beard's interpretation in the 1950s.⁵⁹

Urbán also added an afterword to the volume. It should be noted that he wanted to avoid any direct references to the works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism. He discussed the relationship of Beard and Marxism, for example, but he did not blame Beard that the American historian did not analyze 18th century American society strictly along the lines of Marxist-Leninist class theory as it had been done by the Soviet authors of the two-volume *History of the United States* in the 1950s. Thanks to the explanatory studies of McDonald and Urbán, Hungarian readers could get very good information concerning the historiographical debates about the work of Beard.⁶⁰ The Hungarian historical journal *Világtörténet* (World History), dedicated to the history

⁵⁸ Urbán, Aladár (ed.), *Dokumentumok az Egyesült Államok történetéhez 1774–1918*. [Documents on the History of the United States, 1774–1918] Budapest, 1981.

⁵⁹ Novick, 1995. 335–336.

⁶⁰ McDonald, Forrest, “Bevezetés” [Introduction], In. Beard, Charles A., *Az Egyesült Államok alkotmányának gazdasági értelmezése*. [An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States] Budapest, 1988a. 5–33.; Urbán, Aladár, “Utószó” [Afterword], In. *Ibid.*, 315–327.

of the world outside Hungary, also published a special issue at the bicentennial of the federal constitution in 1987, which contained a study of Forrest McDonald and Aladár Urbán about the ratification of the new federal constitution and the *Bill of Rights*.⁶¹ Another sign of the relatively relaxed new cultural policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was the publication of the first volume of Henry Adams' classic *The History of the United States during the Administration of Jefferson and Madison*, published in 1986.⁶²

But the situation was still complex, since the old official Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the American Revolution was also still present in the Hungarian academy, as the book of László Solti mentioned above and published in 1985 about the historiography of the federal constitution clearly showed.⁶³

The evaluation of the American Revolution is an interesting part of Hungarian historiography during the socialist regime. It was far away from Hungary in time and space and has never been an important topic of Hungarian historiography. At least from the perspective of the traditional main topics of Hungarian historiography, the American Revolution was an event of the periphery. This position was further strengthened by the fact that it did not have direct importance from the point of view of the legitimacy of the socialist regime in Hungary. But it is also true, on the other hand, that Hungarian Marxist-Leninist historians could not avoid the evaluation of it, for several reasons. First, they had to fit it into the Marxist theory of revolutions, because it was an important event in the progress of mankind towards communism. Second, the United States became the main ideological and political antagonist of the socialist camp, and Hungarian Marxist-Leninist historians also had to say something about the founding act of the United States, to base their evaluations of the contemporary relations of the two opposing camps on the interpretation of the American Revolution. As a result, Hungarian historians had to follow the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the great event up to the collapse of the regime, on the one hand, but this situation also created the opportunity to develop some milder versions of the evalua-

⁶¹ McDonald, Forrest, "Mi, az Egyesült Államok népe..." [We, the People of the United States], *Világtörténet* 1, 1988b, 3–20.; Urbán, Aladár, "Az Egyesült Államok alkotmányának életbe léptetése és első kiegészítései (1789–1791)" [The Implementation of the Constitution of the United States and Its First Amendments (1789–1791)], *Világtörténet* 1, 1988b, 20–26.

⁶² Adams, Henry, *Thomas Jefferson első elnöksége (1801–1805)*. [Thomas Jefferson's First Presidency (1801–1805)] Budapest, 1986.

⁶³ Solti, 1985.

tion, according to the changing relations of the capitalist and the socialist camps, on the other hand. This development led to the fluid situation of the 1980s, when the works of non-Marxist historians were also allowed to be published in Hungary. In the 1980s, the old, stricter version of the Marxist-Leninist interpretation evoking the mood of the 1950s, and the new milder or softer version of it were simultaneously present in Hungarian historiography. The stressing of the official ideology of the regime, on the one hand, and the allowance of the publication of the softened version of it if it remained fundamentally within the framework of Marxist ideology, on the other, was a very typical symptom of the late Kádár regime. Approaching the collapse of the regime, it became more clear that these tendencies contradict each other in an irreconcilable way.