

The Change of the System and Myths in Hungarian History in the Twentieth Century

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Received 26 February 2025 | Accepted 27 October 2025 | Published online 22 December 2025

Abstract. This article is an outsider’s attempt to understand and even to reconsider the multifarious aspects of myths concerning the twentieth-century history of Hungary, created and subsequently dismantled and busted from the change of the system in 1989/1990 to around 2004, the period when myth-building appears to have been a vogue. Most examples come from Ignác Romsics’s 2002 *Mítoszok, legendák, tévhitek a 20. századi magyar történelemről* [Myths, Legends, and Misconceptions about Hungary’s Twentieth Century History], the articles of which tackle the issue with a keen historical-analytical grip. In reassessing them, here “myth” is defined as an untrue or fallacious everyday story (legend), belief, or misconception. In history writing also, they are often strongly value-laden, stereotypical, or imaginary representations of an important event, process, phenomenon, or personality, and in times of radical political change, ductile amateurish historians can manipulate them to promote their political ends. Using this definition, the article also aims to show that in the processes of myth-building in Hungarian history writing there have been misguided historians and public history-mongers at work who first gained ground and then became the object of serious scholarly criticism by academic historians, who defended a realist interpretation of certain key moments in Hungarian history. The contention between these two “parties” lingers on.

Keywords: myth, historiography, history politics, history culture, myth-busting

Introduction

This article analyses certain myths in Hungarian twentieth-century history which some historians have created, while on the other hand, some have tried to bust since the change of the system in 1989/1990. Here “myth” is simply defined as an untrue or fallacious everyday story, belief, or misconception often based on legends. In history, it is often a strongly value-laden, stereotypical, or imaginary concept of an important event, phenomenon, or personality.¹ The change in the Hungarian political and economic system from János Kádár’s “soft dictatorship” to a “democratic”

1 Cp. *Oxford English Dictionary*, definition of myth, no. 2.

multi-party system and from state-g geared socialism to market-oriented capitalism in 1989/1990 prepared a fertile ground for their birth and subsequent dismantling. The so-called “free publicity” boosted the use and abuse of history as a political tool or weapon and the politicisation of historians, but it also offered opportunities for serious academic historians to find more truthful or realistic historical factuality against dilettante interpretations. The period under scrutiny spans from 1989/1990 to about 2004, when numerous reinterpretations of important turning points in Hungarian contemporary history started to emerge. Consequently, we can review them for the given purpose. Since that time, innumerable historical works have been produced that are out of the author’s reach, and only passing references to a selection of them can be made here.

The change of system in Hungary inevitably brought with it a reevaluation of the 1956 revolution, as well as of practically the entire twentieth-century history for Hungarians.² There are two richly symbolic landmark events: the rehabilitation and reburial on 16 June 1989³ of Imre Nagy, the PM of the 1956 revolutionary government, soon followed on 6 July 1989 by the death of János Kádár⁴—ending his thirty-three-year career as the leader of the country. Thereafter, along with revised academic works, politicised histories flourished. They tended to tarnish the unfavourable, and glorify the favourable personalities, and to distort processes and phenomena as well as their consequences. A league of legends and misconceptions were born, new myths were fabricated, and some old ones were resuscitated. Liberation from the straitjacket of the dogmatic pseudo-Marxist-Leninist view of history⁵ contributed to the mythologisation and mystification of history.⁶

The radical turn in 1989/1990 caused a crisis in the communist party apparatus. It was at least partly pushed aside, introducing an atmosphere of political uncertainty. Politicians started to pose themselves as interpreters of history, and

2 A well-composed synthetic reappraisal is *The Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*. More polemical is *The Hungarian Revolution. Reform, Revolt and Repression*.

3 There is a solid biography in Rainer, *Nagy Imre*.

4 Tibor Huszár produced a slapdash biography with long citations: *Kádár János politikai életrajza*. A more reliable biography in English is Gough’s *A Good Comrade: János Kádár, Communism and Hungary*.

5 Maybe it can be noted that it applied also to the interpretation of Finnish history. See: Dolmányos, *Finnország története*.

6 This is the vantage-point of Ignác Romsics’s *Mítoszok, legendák, tévhitek a 20. századi magyar történelemről*. Romsics’s “production” is bafflingly wide: he earned his laurels with *Bethlen István* and his early *Magyarország története a XX. században* accompanied by the two volumes of *Magyar történelmi szöveggyűjtemény, Vol. I–II*, which has been translated into English: *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*. It rivals László Kontler’s *Millennium in Central Europe. A History of Hungary*.

historians stepped into politics.⁷ This state of affairs has continued for decades, and it seems that every party has found its myths in history that they can use, for instance, during election campaigns. It may be argued that this “instant history” helped to form collective myths. The more realistic historians try to warn against politicising research institutions and universities, but they seem to have been forced into defensive positions.

It is not always easy to tell which of the myths are old, and which ones are more recent, but they can be vaguely classified into four categories: 1) conspiracy “theories,” 2) beautifying or black-painting of some periods, 3) sanctified locations/ places, myths of suffering/saving, and 4) “predestined, chosen people” and rebirth/ origin-myths.⁸ Hungarian history offers an array of examples: various explanations of the Trianon catastrophe, Admiral Miklós Horthy as the saviour of Hungary (cp. the Mannerheim-cult in Finland),⁹ Kádár as a “good leader” or a “traitor,”¹⁰ living standards and the political atmosphere of “goulash-communism,” and romantic ideas connected to St. Stephen and the birth of the Hungarian Kingdom—an entire arsenal of manifold and politically appealing myths that have often become folklore.

Some realistic historians oppose the tweaking of history to serve political goals and demand rational explanations even if the reading public would expect engaging answers—such as the *Terror Háza* [House of Terror Museum] exhibits with horrible scenes of red terror during state socialism, leaving the earlier white terror in the shadows. Mostly (liberal/conservative) professional historians have been in the frontline of the myth-busters who tend to stay aloof from party politics. Their realistic analyses have rectified or disproved often traumatic and resistant legends and myths and have unveiled illusions projected onto the past.

The Collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and Trianon

A major question that has preoccupied Hungarian historians is why the Dual Monarchy collapsed with the end of World War I. Explanations range from combinations of social and national factors to expositions of foreign countries’ plans to divide the Monarchy. Despite the tendency to combine internal and external factors to create an umbrella explanation, there is no unanimity about the primary

7 Nyssönen, *The Presence of the Past in Politics. ‘1956’ after 1956 in Hungary*, passim.

8 This is an application of Girardet’s, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 9–24; Schöplin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths,” 28–35.

9 *Cultic Revelations. Studies in Modern Historical Cult Personalities and Phenomena*; Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós*.

10 See e.g., *Rubicon*, dedicated to János Kádár: 1998: 1, 2000: 6 and 2000: 7–8.

causes of the collapse. One way to approach the dilemma has been to analyse the interpretations contemporaries or historians gave soon after the catastrophe in the light of their recently gathered knowledge. Gergely Romsics has compared sixty-five Hungarian political memoirs with fifty-five Austrian ones—they represent different politicised collective memories and images of history and reveal a spectrum of historical myths.¹¹

To begin with, the Austrians had an identity problem: on the one hand, they were German citizens of a state, on the other hand, citizens of the Dual Monarchy. On the political map of Austria in the 1920s and 1930s, “Old Austrian” (conservative) theories of the break-up were nostalgic and elegiac and contained a paradox: they point to the signs and omens of disintegration but at the same time present it as an unexpected and unnatural disaster. Nostalgia is highlighted in the memoir of the former Minister of War Alexander Freiherr von Krobatin,¹² in which the demise of Franz Joseph is depicted as the loss of last hope, ruining the stately conglomeration. This “unexpected” collapse was not at all regarded as the Germans’ fault; the culprit was one of the three possible plots, not the much-used freemasonry, not the Jews, nor the Jesuits but the entire Entente, perjurers in the army (the *Dolchstoss*-theory), Hungarians, or all of these together. The main cause of the military catastrophe was not seen in the failure of the military leadership but in the activities of Hungarian defeatists, other disrupting forces, rebellions, strikes, socialist agitation, and defection. No mention is made of the rebels in the army either. This means that in this perspective Austria is completely acquitted. In a social-psychological sense, they could be understood as rather obscure but definitely contributing causes.

The bourgeois-liberal theory, in turn, portrayed the collapse as a tragedy: the Dual Monarchy was exhausted, and it was left in the lurch. The theory was very much in demand in internal politics; it could be used to hit the Austrian national socialists, who claimed the ruin was due to “internal rottenness.” Again, the Hungarians (Sándor Wekerle, Albert Apponyi, and István Tisza¹³) were blamed, as they had stopped all reforms and cherished their national pride and separatism. According to the theory, their short-sightedness had precipitated the ruin, as they failed to understand the core of Austrian policy, the civilising mission, which all the nationalities in the Empire should have supported.

11 Romsics, “A Habsburg Monarchia felbomlásának osztrák és magyar mítoszai az emlékirodalom tükrében,” 87–131. For the debates concerning the primary causes of disintegration, see Sked, “Explaining the Habsburg Empire,” 123–58.

12 *Erinnerungen an Franz Joseph, Kaiser von Österreich, Apostolischer König von Ungarn* (1931).

13 Cp. Tőkéczi László describes István Tisza as a person willing to compromise, obstinate to go to war, and a cautious politician, who as a liberal-conservative supported German–Hungarian relations. See Tőkéczi, *Tisza István eszmei, politikai arca*.

Liberal memoirs and histories are coloured with pessimism and feelings of defeat, whereas in national-socialist writings moral decay and unavoidable disintegration could be radically turned into an opportunity for revival and a key to the future. As in Germany, their authors proposed a new start for Austria.¹⁴ This neo-Austrian policy was represented also by the paramilitary organisation called *Heimwehr*. In opposition to “Old Austrians,” it did not regard the Monarchy as a golden age, but rather as a period when the seeds of destruction had been sowed. To them, Hungarian federalists were traitors and supporters of the Great German ideology. These views helped alleviate the disappointed military elite’s trauma of defeat. In general, right-wing movements shunned the idea of an imperial mission and proposed a national awakening as their solution for revival.¹⁵

Moving toward the left of the Austrian political spectrum, we find a vision diametrically opposed to that of the right. Among the socialists, Karl Renner and Otto Bauer believed that the Monarchy had had no chance to survive because it was a relic of a feudal order. Nevertheless, they accused the military and the bureaucracy of keeping up a “forced state” (*Zwangstaat*). They argued that the colossus, labelled as the “prison of nations,” had not been democratised into a multinational state that would have been able to recognize the autonomy of its separate parts. In their view, after the collapse, only the independence of the nations could promise a better life for the previously suppressed nations.

Romsics’s analysis reveals that the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy was not the primary impulse for Hungarian myth-mongers, but it was the 1918 revolution, the short-lived republic, and in particular, the longstanding trauma inflicted by the peace treaty of Trianon (1920).¹⁶ With Trianon, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory; the part transferred to Romania alone was larger than the new Hungary. Hungary’s population decreased from 25 million to 8 million, and over a third of Hungarians remained outside the borders of “Rump-Hungary”—all this was bound to raise deep bitterness and demands of revision. Hungarians’ explanations for the break-up of historical Hungary were political rather than structural; they mainly referred to the wrong decisions made by leading politicians and to general political crisis of the Monarchy (the unresolved nationality question, the delay of the land reform, and debates over election laws¹⁷).

14 E.g., von Bardolff, *Soldat in alten Österreich: Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*.

15 One representative example of this was: von Sydacoff, *Die Wahrheit über Habsburgs Ende: Politische-feuilletonistische Aufzeichnungen*.

16 For a reliable interpretation, see Romsics, *A trianoni békeszerződés*. On the trauma: Romsics, “Nemzeti traumánk: Trianon,” 327–68.

17 E.g., Ernő Garami of the ‘hurtful labor pains of Hungary’ in his *Forrongó Magyarország: Emlékezések és tanulságok*.

Soon after the Trianon Treaty, however, the so-called *Horthyist* interpretation aimed at the consolidation of the nation gained ground and a myth was born implying that historical Hungary would have been quite viable if its political elite had been composed of wise statesmen. It gave merit to the nationality policy managed by Hungarian leaders before the break-up, and pointed at revolutionary socialists, proud aristocrats, Jews, and Germanophiles as guilty of the catastrophe.¹⁸ Particularly during Gyula Gömbös's government (1932–1936), the radical right began to popularize race theories, search moles, agitators, and defeatists.¹⁹ A “dagger-stab” theory (Charles IV's mistakes and dilettantism) was laid down, and a myth of undermining the national sense of self-defence was disseminated. The main trauma of Trianon was inculcated into the minds of Hungarians and all political parties, socialists included, blaming both the Entente and pre-Trianon Hungarian politics in general as the main factors that led to a national suicide.²⁰ The trauma needed special healing not only from politicians but also from poets, writers, historians, and philosophers, and the political-psychological panacea was a demand for the revision of the Trianon borders.²¹

The culprit discourse became folklore, and some of the legends it generated are still alive.²² One of them is connected to the leader of the Hungarian delegation in peace negotiations, Count Albert Apponyi. He was accused of intriguing and irritating the French—who machinated the shameful peace treaty—as well as of selling the Hungarian cause at too low a price. The truth, however, is more complicated. The border issue had been broadly resolved already in the summer of 1919, and it was only Lloyd George and some Italian politicians who had some sympathy for the Hungarian conditions. Their rejection by the French sealed the matter when Great Britain reached an agreement with it in the Near East. Apponyi's negotiation position was weak from the outset; he was not scheming about anything, nor did he represent Hungary disrespectfully at the negotiation table. Clemenceau's cooling attitude towards Hungary was an undeniably decisive factor—and it was not influenced by the unsuccessful marriage of his son to a Hungarian woman, as legend in Hungary had it. The French Foreign Ministry no longer saw the Monarchy, let alone Hungary, as a counterweight to Germany but sided with the Little Entente (Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes).

18 Here the Magyarisation-policy (Grünwald's) was forgotten. See Pók, “Utószó,” 415–443.

19 Gyula Gömbös is still respected on the right as a “defender of the Hungarian race.” See e.g., Marschalkó, *Gömbös Gyula. A fajvédő vezér*.

20 E.g., Prónay, *Emlékeiből és válogatott beszédei*.

21 The internationally distributed book arguing for revision titled *Justice for Hungary* (London, 1928) found its way to Finland also in the early 1930s and received appreciation among some leading politicians.

22 Ablonczy, “Trianon-legendák,” 132–61.

After the ratification of the Trianon Peace Treaty, new legends, impregnated by political illusions concerning its drafting, were rampant. Widely popularised was the misconception that the heirs of the Dual Monarchy, who were hostile to Hungary, especially Czechs and Romanians, had manipulated to their advantage the maps and other material that were shown to the peace negotiators. Consequently, the negotiators did not know exactly what they were doing when they drew up the new borders of Hungary. In Hungary, the peace treaty with its unfair borders was deemed fraud, and its revision was claimed. Documents show that the Czechs (Beneš, Masaryk) demanded more territory (a so-called Slavic corridor) from Hungary than what they were finally granted. It has been corroborated that in Paris the negotiators had sufficient information about the local conditions and ethnic relations near the borders, and the border lines were initially planned accordingly. However, strategic considerations overruled ethnic relations and, for instance, the railways between Hungary and Transylvania were transferred to Romania. On the other hand, the border commission did not accept the Romanian demand to move the border to the Tisza River. Obviously, this decision did not satisfy the Romanians, and a legend was born that the Hungarians had bribed the Entente powers. Nevertheless, the Trianon borders of 1920, with minor revisions in Western Hungary, roughly correspond to the present border line.

It was widely believed in Hungary that the Trianon Peace Treaty would be valid only for a certain period and that the League of Nations could change it in Hungary's favour. The Treaty document,²³ however, does not say anything about its validity, but its nineteenth article states that it may be reopened "if it threatens peace in the world."²⁴ The Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 annulled the Trianon Treaty, but the Hungarian borders stayed the same—except for a small territory opposite Bratislava (Pozsony) that was granted to Czechoslovakia. It also left minorities unprotected.

Interwar Hungary

In the interwar period, Hungarian foreign policy concentrated on creating favourable power-political constellations that would rectify the "injustice" of Trianon.²⁵ Studies on this policy, called "revisionism," were on a sidetrack in the Hungary of the 1960s and 1970s, because Marxist–Leninist historiography simply stamped the

23 *A trianoni békeszerződés.*

24 *A magyar békeszerződés, 24.*

25 Nicely balanced synthesis on 1914: Ormos, *Magyarország a két világháború korában 1914–1945.*

Horthy regime as revanchist and fascist.²⁶ That was an ideologically correct myth. When the system change gave historians the opportunity to blow this myth, there was some shift in the opposite direction: Hungarian foreign policy was shown as a somewhat independent agent in the games of the great powers. Urges to find new interpretations and tendentiousness led to the overestimation and apology of the Horthy regime. They also contained contradictory lessons from World War II: Hungary was Hitler's last ally, and at the same time a friend of England, wanting to get out of the war. Hungarians were presented as enthusiastic irredenta-mongers but, at the same time, were shown to have suffered from the deviousness of their neighbours.

A more serious interpretation of Hungary's participation in World War II was put forward at a conference on the History of the World—History of Hungary, held at Bloomington University in 1983. György Ránki maintained that although Hungarian hopes and demands for revision could have been realised only by a major change in power-political relations, this did not mean that Hungary wanted to join the war. Nor did it mean that Hungary wanted to join as an ally of Nazi Germany. Ránki concluded that Hungary had practically no other choice but to join the revisionist bloc and be drawn into a reluctant partnership with the Germans. In this way, Hungary became a walker on “a forced path” and eventually a traveller on a “drifting ferry” (cp. the legendary “drifting wood” theory in Finnish military history). Ránki's view was widely accepted;²⁷ only more recently, has there been criticism against it.²⁸

The weakness in Ránki's argument is that it presents the interwar foreign policy of Hungary as if there had been some genuine alternatives and its leaders would have had a choice between them. In fact, it has been shown that their strategy calculations could not work, since as a small country Hungary was at the mercy of greater forces and its leaders found themselves in unexpected and extreme situations.²⁹ The room for manoeuvring was very limited, and politicians faced uncertainty where they often had to improvise. They no longer had real choices but were forced to do an *ad hoc* weighing of disadvantages and possible advantages. Accordingly, the “forced path” can be defined more precisely: it applied to a situation in which Hungary's foreign

26 The Horthy regime has been labeled as a “parliamentary-authoritarian” system, rather than truly dictatorial. See Püski, “Demokrácia és diktatúra között,” 206–33; Püski, *Horthy-rendszer (1919–1945)*.

27 See e.g., Lengyel, *Mozgástér és kényszerpálya*. Cp. Sipos, *Magyarország külpolitikája a XX. században*, which contains a more moderate and sensible interpretation. Cp. Sipos, *Magyar külpolitikai gondolkodás a 20. században*.

28 Szakály, *Volt-e alternatíva*; Zeidler, “Mozgástér a kényszerpályán. A magyar külpolitika választásai a két háború között,” 162–205.

29 Something similar can be said about Finnish foreign policy decision-makers before the Winter War.

political interests and goals did not determine the course of actions, because some external agent intervened. The definition of Ránki's concept of the room for manoeuvre (*mozgástér*) may be reformulated as the "room to play the game," meaning the possibility of influencing European politics and pursuing Hungarian interests and goals in its vicinity. That "room" was dwindling during the war. Whereas for some other small countries (e.g., Sweden) even a small "room to play" could yield profits, for many others it only gave negative or suspicious alternatives (cp. Finnish policy).

At the beginning of the 1920s, Hungarian foreign policy was searching for an outlet. The country was isolated, and it was difficult to practice independent foreign policy because its goals were far too ambitious and followed the general opinion that demanded an extensive revision of the borders. Hungary did not have any "friendly" states to support it; on the contrary, the Little Entente opposed it, and the League of Nations could not do anything. The policy of "fishing in the storm"³⁰ brought only a small catch: "on December 14, 1921, the legendary referendum took place in the western Hungarian town of Sopron according to the Venice Protocol whether a total of 257 km² should belong to Hungary or Austria. This was the only major territorial revision of the Treaty of Trianon that was permanently accepted by the Great Powers. After 72.8 percent voted for Hungary, the city was awarded the title of »Civitas Fidelissima« (most loyal town)."³¹ Pushed hard, Italy turned out to be willing to start the revision process but with the rise of Nazism, it was impossible to reach any international agreement. A turn took place in 1932–1933 after anglophile Prime Minister István Bethlen had resigned in 1931 and Gyula Gömbös came to power. He counted on Germany's support, but Hitler was not warming to a definitive rapprochement yet. Some critical experts warned that aligning with the Reich could be dangerous—support in foreign policy might lead to foreign political slavery.³² If Germany expanded to the borders of Hungary, the revision policy would become just a pawn in Hitler's power politics.

Hungarian hopes were running high when possibilities for revision were actualised before the outbreak of World War II. Hitler gave vague hints that Hungary might gain territory from Czechoslovakia, but Hungarian leaders hoped that all the four great powers would acquiesce to the changes in border lines (First Vienna Award on 2 November 1938, Second Vienna Award on 30 August 1940). In return, Hungary had to make concessions to Germany by joining the Anti-Comintern Pact

30 Quoted by Zeidler, "Mozgástér a kényszerpályán. A magyar külpolitika választásai a két háború között," 169.

31 Sopron Chose Hungary 100 Years Ago. *Hungary Today*, 14 December 2021.

32 Miksa Fenyő's study of Hitler from the year 1934. Bethlen regarded Germany's defeat so likely that he drafted a peace plan for Hungary only with the Western powers. See his "Emlékirat a nagyhatalmak béketerveiről és Magyarország revíziós céljairól," 364–85.

and resigning from the League of Nations. Hungarian policy took a chance that closed certain foreign policy options and made the “room to play the game” smaller, since the Western powers did not recognise the move, although Germany did.

In November 1940, Hungary aligned with the Axis. Its obligations and consequences turned out to be damaging, leading Hungary to a war against the enemies of Germany. Those who opposed Teleki’s plans, like Bethlen who to the very end warned against intervening in great power conflicts, could easily condemn it afterwards.³³ Teleki surmised that if Hungary was dragged into the war, its defence forces could be saved to defend the acquired territories. His calculation failed when Hitler suggested that Hungary should attack Yugoslavia, and promised in return the territories where there were some 400,000 Hungarians living. Aware of the opposing British stance and suspecting the German defeat, Teleki found himself in a corner and shot himself. Less sceptic Prime Minister László Bárdossy³⁴ directed the Hungarian army against the Soviet Union with the *Wehrmacht*, a fateful move which did not give Hungary any advantages. Instead, the country had to stay in the war to the bitter end, as the way to a separate peace offered to Finland was not an option for Hungary.

Mythical stories of the “forced path” of Hungary to World War II and the hard times as its consequences have camouflaged the real nature of the failure of its foreign policy. The first contributing factor to Hungary’s demise is that its goals were far too ambitious. Secondly, it did not give up on any of its territorial demands even when no other state supported it. Thirdly, Hungary pursued revisionism in times when there was no certainty of keeping the territorial acquisitions. Fourthly, the acquisitions were bound up with the external German goals of seizing more *Lebensraum*, that most European powers could never accept. Finally, poorly armed Hungary went to a war in which it had more unreliable allies than reliable and strong enemies.³⁵

The myth created in the period of Socialism that Hungary had already been at war when its army occupied Yugoslav territories (11 April 1941) is distinctly ideological.

33 Bethlen, *Hungarian Politics during World War II*, 10.

34 During his one-year premiership, Bárdossy declared war on England and the United States, and started ethnic cleansing among Serbs and Jews. In this paper, it is impossible to deal with the Hungarian Holocaust (see Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon*; Sipos, “The Fascist Arrow-Cross Government in Hungary,” 109); and its mythology, let it suffice to add that Ernő Szép in his *Emberszag* [The Smell of Humans] mentions how Hungarian military circles spread the legend that Jews directed the Allied bombers over Budapest public buildings by giving light signals from the roofs of houses and how children had learned from primary school teachers that Jews would kill and eat them. Bibó’s *Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után* gives a dismal picture of Hungarian postwar antisemitism—his remarkable contribution to the issue and its background are succinctly analysed by Tuomas Laine-Frigrén in his “Antisemitismi Unkarissa,” 121–34.

35 Zeidler, “Mozgástér a kényszerpályán,” 201–03.

Also, the myth from the 1960s that Hungary went along the “forced path” only when its army attacked the Soviet Union is repudiated by the fact that it joined the Axis earlier and launched an invasion in the south. Freedom of action was lost as early as 1940–1941. In fact, international opinion and also politicians at home were convinced that Hungary could not deviate from the path staked out by the Axis powers.

The myth of liberation

One of the most persistent myths in Hungarian twentieth-century history was born in aftermath of the World War II. The change of power in 1945 which began with the Soviet occupation was called “liberation” (*felszabadulás*) for almost fifty years. Again, it became ideological, a sort of dogma in the official political usage. Although the Red Army chased Nazis out of Hungary (“liberated”), the question of what really happened soon afterward began to preoccupy the minds of historians after 1989/1990. The pivotal question was: what had Stalin planned for the future of Eastern Europe and Hungary particularly? Two different answers have been given.

According to the traditional view, the Soviets had from the very beginning aimed at the Sovietisation of the countries they had occupied. This has been criticised by the so-called leftist-revisionist group of historians. They refer to the attempts of the United States to build an “informal empire” (financial and economic) to which the Soviet Union had to react. Some historians argue that the Sovietisation of Hungary was not decided in advance, but the Soviet Union acted later for security reasons when the United States started the Cold War.³⁶

The revisionists’ argument can be divided into several statements: 1) when the United States started the Cold War, the Soviet Union acted pragmatically and pursued a peaceful solution in Europe, but the Marshall-program forced it into action; 2) thus, the later Sovietisation of Eastern Europe was a reaction to the economic threat coming from the United States; 3) the Soviet Union would have continued co-operation with the Western powers for longer, and it had not planned the establishment of “people’s democracies” early on but rather restricted the home-communists in their eagerness (cp. in Finland the “years of danger”) to take power—they had to agree to forming the so-called ‘peoples’ fronts’. The conclusion was that the Soviet Union acted on pragmatic evaluations of the developing constellation, rather than on ideological grounds. However, it has been shown that all the statements contain only half-truths.³⁷

The statement about the economic pressure of the United States is correct but the Soviet Union also needed economic support. It is also true that Hungarian

36 See Ungváry, “Magyarország szovjetizálásának kérdései,” 280.

37 Ungváry, “Magyarország szovjetizálásának kérdései,” 282.

communists had some room for manoeuvring but only within the limits set by the Soviets. Rákosi was advised to steer toward a national form of Sovietisation and was exhorted to self-criticism.

As far as Stalin's pragmatism, it contained a fair dose of cynicism. Concerning the Sovietisation of the Baltic states, Moscow saw that the communists could do the trick when the time for takeover was ripe. The policy of gradualism did not necessarily mean Stalin's will to use peaceful solutions. Instead, he held onto the division of spheres of interest laid out in the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, made his stance known in diplomacy, and waited for the weakening of the "imperialist" states and the escalation of class-wars in Eastern Europe. As to the tactics for moving on with Sovietisation there, he was introduced to a three-step plan: first, dissidence among home communists should be subdued,³⁸ then a temporary "peoples" front led by the communists should be formed, and finally all "bourgeois" parties should be smoked out it.³⁹ When the Sovietization of the occupied Eastern European countries was finalised, the Soviet Union could claim that it would not allow another great power on the continent. This claim was pure propaganda, since Great Britain's influence had weakened. Instead, the talk about "peaceful co-existence" was propaganda because the mission of Soviet diplomacy was to incite conflicts, even war between the "imperialist" powers. The final goal was worldwide revolution and power. In this context, Hungary's fate was predestined, and there was no power to stop its realisation, especially because the United States had no vested interest in it. With support from Moscow, communists in Hungary increased their grip on power, although at times Moscow would apply brakes to harness their ambitions.

There remains the question about the nature of "liberation." One should find a definition or at least some fitting characterisation to treat fairly the victims of both the Nazis and the Soviet occupation. The minimum interpretation would be "liberation" from Arrow-Cross terror followed by "free" but dire living circumstances under Soviet occupation and a gradual tightening of the communist rule. Those who hardly ever use the concept of "liberation" do not think that the Russians brought "freedom" but they say that they saved people from the threat of death and the country from total devastation. But "liberation" did not mean anything to the people who were harassed, oppressed, raped, persecuted, or hurled to Siberia (also those whom the Russians "deported" from the Budapest ghetto). Their families could never think of the postwar times as "free."

38 In 1945–1949, the Hungarian elite and intelligentsia, some twelve thousand people were "cleansed," and communists took over student and research organisations. In 1971, some 64 percent of intellectuals were members of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. See Papp, "A NÉKOSZ-legendája és valósága," 337–38.

39 Ivan Maiski's plan from the year 1944. *Külpolitika* 3–4 (1996): 154–84.

On closer inspection, we find that “liberation” was an individual or a group experience. If a man declared to the Russians that he had been a communist during the war, he was sent to prison. As a historical concept, “liberation” does not suit Hungary, and as the communist rule consolidated and Russian occupation continued, it became ideological in a totalitarian sense. For instance, Sándor Márai felt that “There was no liberation anywhere—neither in me, nor in the outside world—but release (*megszabadulás*) happened since the caricature [prewar semi-feudal Hungary of nobility] finally disappeared.”⁴⁰ We may conclude that in our case “liberation” can be interpreted as “getting rid of” the burden of past subjugation without any feeling of “liberty” in the present. To what extent the communists felt liberated, while they preached the ‘liberation’ sermon and organized “liberation” exhibitions, is still an intriguing question.

The uprising of 1956

The 1956 uprising and its suppression had been such a painful experience and memory for Hungarians that it has been a fertile feeding ground for myths. After 1989, the uprising was an open topic, and in 1990 it was codified by a law as ‘revolution,’ which conclusively removed the stamp of counter-revolution. The system change also revolutionised history writing; the themes surrounding the uprising exploded giving room for speculations, legends as well as serious studies.⁴¹ My intention, however, is to tackle only one myth about the uprising, namely that the “revolution,” which was an uprising at the outset, could have exacerbated into a real revolution if certain conditions had been fulfilled. The myth can, however, be overturned by the critiques which prove beyond doubt that the Soviet onslaught could not have been defeated.⁴² The Soviet army was superior to that of the revolutionaries, and no outside power could, or indeed want to, intervene on their side.

The wide international support was of a moral kind. Why not military? There were several reasons. Only the United States could have challenged the Soviets, but there were many obstacles. Preparations for presidential elections were on the way, leaving no space for sufficient attention to the Hungarian predicament. The State Department had not been provided with the necessary instructions on how to act,

40 Márai, *Föld, föld*, 101–2. Quoted by Ungváry, “Magyarország szovjetizálásának kérdései,” 308.

41 The present author has found 1956. *Forradalom és szabadságharc* (by Zoltán Ripp) and *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom* (by György Litván) the most easily accessible in style.

42 Békés, “Győzhetett-e volna a magyar forradalom 1956-ban,” 339–60. Lauri Hjelt, the Ambassador of Finland, reported from the scene that the uprising was not going to succeed. See Halmesvirta, “Unkarilaisia illuusioita ja reaaliolitiikkaa,” 127–38.

and the legation in Budapest proved incompetent. Secretary of State Dulles was hospitalised when the crisis was acute, and when President Eisenhower was asked about the possibility of intervention, he remarked that “Hungary is as inaccessible as Tibet.”⁴³ The way through Austria was diplomatically closed and any military action would have been dangerous, risking the outbreak of a world war. Despite these considerations, it was still argued that if the Suez crisis had not tied down Western powers, the Soviet Union could at least have been criticised with its position defied more vigorously.⁴⁴ All this was wishful thinking.⁴⁵ With hindsight it has become clear that no international demonstrations or declarations could have stopped the Soviet intervention, and the Western powers had to finally accept that military action was impossible. Suez provided a good excuse for them. Misconceived is also the retrospective view that the United Nations could/should have acted as a mediator, uniting the Western front against the Soviet Union in the crisis, and stopping the intervention. During the Cold War, the United Nations did not have any efficient say in matters concerning the interest spheres of great powers.

One version of the success myth of the uprising had it that the Soviets were seriously weighing the pros and cons of the intervention until the last moment (30 October). If they had decided to back out, the revolution might have succeeded, and Hungary could have become independent (!). The documents from the Moscow archives indisputably show that the leaders gave Imre Nagy a few moments of grace and were watching if he could keep Hungary communist and within the Soviet bloc. If Nagy had managed to do so, Hungary might have avoided intervention like Poland did. However, Nagy announced withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact—the main demand of the revolutionaries—and consequently, Moscow made the decision to intervene.

Yet another myth concerns the still widely accepted belief that János Kádár’s regime guaranteed social security, work, and relative well-being, produced material and technical progress, developed into consumer socialism, and could thus be called goulash or fridge-socialism of “little liberties” with a bright future ahead.⁴⁶ Kádár and socialism itself were merited for this state of affairs. There is still a considerable amount of nostalgia among the elderly: in the summer of 2001, it was proposed that a statue should be erected to Kádár. The opinion of the “man of the street” seems to be that he was irreplaceable to Hungary.⁴⁷ Like Kekkonen was to Finland.

43 Eisenhower’s remark in *Presidential Personality and Improvisational Decision-Making: Eisenhower and the 1956 Hungarian Crisis*, 309.

44 See e.g., *1956 Intézet Évkönyv V. 1996–1997*, 242–45.

45 President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, tried to make Khrushchev change his mind asking him to avoid bloodshed, but to no avail.

46 Gerő and Pető, “Bevezetés,” 5–12.

47 The author of this article has heard this opinion mostly from retired professionals and workers.

Behind the welfare myth lies the shock effect of the system change. When the standard of living and GDP suddenly dropped, many Hungarians remembered how everyone had been ensured at least the minimum income and social services during the Kádár regime. The 1989 swift turn to the market economy and “wild” capitalism brought with it unemployment and insecurity in the lower social classes. The ensuing “democratisation” seemed to mean only a growing inequality and the enrichment of the new elite.⁴⁸ The great expectations of the overwhelming majority of the population were disappointed.

In order to gain insight into the realities of the Kádár period, we should take a closer look at the prevalent living standards, consumption, and material and technical development in comparison to the previous, dictatorial period of state-socialism (1949–1956) at the end of which Hungary faced economic distress followed by the 1956 uprising.⁴⁹

From 1957, the Kádár regime used carrots and sticks to punish⁵⁰ and placate citizens. The party took measures to stop the irritating political surveillance of citizens’ private lives, but the socialist propaganda kept its educating role at schools, workplaces, unions, and in other, more voluntary social associations. Perhaps the greatest difference between the Rákosi and the Kádár systems was that Kádárism did not apply everyday intimidation, harassment, or pressurizing, and gradually abandoned political trials.⁵¹

Uncontrolled criticism of the party-state and reform ideas could hardly grow in the 1960s, when a great majority of Hungarians concentrated on acquiring material goods for their living. The system legitimised itself by promising an ever better tomorrow. It tried to avoid the mistakes of the Rákosi period in oversized economic planning and megalomaniac industrialisation and invested more in the production of consumer goods to keep people satisfied. It was still proclaimed that the socialist economy could overcome capitalism, but in the long run technical and organisational backwardness, lack of quality control and competent personnel, as well as the

48 This was more bitterly experienced by Hungarian minorities in Romania and Slovakia. See Halmesvirta, “Reflections on the New Capitalist Culture and Identity,” 73–82.

49 This section is largely based on Valuch, “A gulyáskommunizmus,” 361–90; *Magyarország társadalomtörténe a XX. század második felében*.

50 Between December 1956 and summer 1961, 341 of them were hanged (299 were sentenced to death for participation in the revolution), 26,000 were brought to court and 22,000 were sentenced, more than half of them more than five years in prison (e.g., István Bibó’s sentence was for life, but he was pardoned in 1963 but was not returned his citizen rights). Besides, in 1957–1960, about 13,000 were interned, tens of thousands were evicted, dismissed from work, and placed under police control. All these punitive measures concerned some 100,000 persons and their families. See *The 1956 Revolution: A History of Documents*, 375.

51 Huszár and Szabó, *Restauráció vagy kiigazítás*.

low level of infrastructure hindered the achievement of the targets of the grandiose five-year plans. The planned 40–50 percent growth in consumption in the years 1961–1965 could not be met, and the production of some basic foodstuffs (milk, flour, potatoes, and vegetables) was less in 1967 than in 1960.⁵² Continuous failures to satisfy the needs of consumers and low salaries motivated and gave rise to the so-called “second economy:” e.g., selling garden products on markets, exchange of services, small businesses, without which the system would have collapsed.⁵³ In the mid-1970s, Hungary had to resort to foreign loans to finance its domestic demand. It was difficult to obtain raw materials and energy in the required quantities. The party-state ran into deep debts, which was one of the main reasons of the fall of the system.⁵⁴

Up to the year 1975, Hungarian workers’ incomes were increasing but did not reach Western European levels. Real incomes increased in 1960–1980 by 3.8 percent a year but in the same period, prices doubled and consumption more than doubled. In the 1980s, 40 percent of the income accrued from unregistered sources. Nevertheless, in 1968 the average income of two wage earners was enough to maintain a family of five, while 3.3 million people lived on a minimum subsistence level, and of them 1.4 million could be classified as poor (14 percent of the population). Concomitantly, the consequences of goulash-socialism started to show in people’s state of health:⁵⁵ alcoholism, suicides, coronary disease, and depression rose to alarming levels, and national health in general deteriorated. At the same time, differences in incomes increased considerably, and the huge bureaucracy ate up resources. The positive image of goulash-socialism that it would feed and take care of everybody was tarnished but its ideology emphasised (apologised) that a socialist man/woman is different from a capitalist one: he/she does not accumulate fortunes but thinks of the “common good.” Pragmatic Kádár declared that “it is proper to save up for buying a TV, a fridge, a motorbike, or a car, to own a house and to travel” but all excesses (i.e., luxury) would be seen as hoarding.⁵⁶ No wonder, possessing a car became a sort of socialist status symbol of the 1970s. Many Hungarians lived in the so-called shortage economy, which was called “fridge-socialism” because to buy a fridge one had to work harder than before, and to fill it up was more expensive than before.⁵⁷

52 Valuch, “A gulyáskommunizmus,” 370–71.

53 See esp. Holger Fischer’s article in *Agriculture and Rural Life in Finland and Hungary*.

54 Földes, *Az eladósodás politikátörténete 1957–1986*.

55 See Halmesvirta, *Co-operation across the Iron Curtain*, esp. Chapter II.

56 Kádár, *Hazaifiság és internacionalizmus*, 83.

57 This was reflected in jokes one example of which is the following: One comrade complained that although it was announced on the radio that large amounts of meat, milk and butter had been

There was a typically human way out of misery: enterprising people improved their standards of living by starting their own businesses independently of the system, which gave them more room to operate. Their entrepreneurship provided the means required in the transition to the consumer society. This applied also to the lower classes. The more the socialist system in Hungary allowed private businesses, the more it lost its economy-based legitimacy. The propaganda declaring that the socialist economy paved the way to prosperity for all was gradually losing its credibility.

As myths in general, and in the same way as several myths in twentieth-century Hungarian history testify, the ones of goulash-socialism contain an element of truth.⁵⁸ They tend to generalise from a small, selected group of points, and a desired positive picture is painted. It seems that nowadays these generalisations are rather imaginations used in giving justification to build cultic spectacles around certain bygone statesmen, for instance, during reburials (e.g., Admiral Miklós Horthy's reburial in 1993 or the nineteenth-century poet Sándor Petőfi's "reburial" at the Kerepesi Cemetery in 2015). They stir—often with religious liturgy—deep sentiments and imaginary visions and keep up collectively a trumped-up tradition of cultic commemoration.⁵⁹

Such cult occasions incite heated debate, and realistic historians resent their falsification of history.⁶⁰ This juxtaposition points to the difference between public and academic history: politicians dealing with public history promiscuously use "history" for day-to-day purposes,⁶¹ while academic historians either remind them of the pitfalls of the abuse of history or simply ignore them because they will not listen. The import of their work⁶² and a deep understanding of the latest directions of the theory of history⁶³ provide ammunition to the younger generation of histori-

produced lately, his fridge remained empty. His friend had a solution at hand: "Connect the fridge to the radio." In: Kaasalainen and Lounela, *Ole totinen, toveri. Kaskuja kansademokratiaista*, 34.

58 Although the Hungarian and East German security services produced misleading information about the people surveilled, there was some truth in it that could somehow convince the superior officers. Cp. Dalos, "Testvérszervek – Az NDK és a Magyar Népköztársaság állambiztonsági szerveinek együttműködése," 82–95.

59 *Mindenütt felyül ég. Gyász, temetések és újratemetések a magyar kultusz- és irodalomtörténetben*. Cp. *Cultic Revelations. Studies in Modern Historical Cult Personalities and Phenomena*.

60 See e.g., Ignác Romsics's article on the Horthy-cult in *Cultic Revelations. Studies in Modern Historical Cult Personalities and Phenomena*.

61 Jeremy, *Using History*.

62 Ignác Romsics has quite systematically helped to lift Hungarian history writing to an admirable level. See his *Múltról a mának. Tanulmányok és esszék a magyar történelemről*; *Clio bűvöletében; A múlt arcai; Magyarország története* and his two-volume *Egotörténelem. Hetven év*, which is an autobiography revealing much about Hungarian history politics.

63 Gábor Gyáni is distinguished in this sector: see especially his *A történeti tudás*, reviewed in the *Hungarian Historical Review* 12, no. 2 (2023). It crowns an imposing series of studies on

ans to bust myths and legends that only tend to aggravate the Hungarian historical traumas. One reminder, however, is appropriate here: the literary scholar István Margócsy, who has tried to bust the persistent Petőfi myths, reminds us that such myths are so convincing to their believers that historical facts cannot disprove them. Misconceptions as beliefs have such power that a myth as a tale or a legend can satisfy the needs people have for cults and their rituals. Consequently, historical or other explanations become impossible because the rational argument against the mythical fortress of cults is doomed to defeat them.⁶⁴ And this leads to a situation in which we have to be constantly aware of the emergence of ever-new legends.

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64 Margócsy, “...hány helyen nincsen Petőfi,” 183–206.

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