

Gerő, András. *Public Space in Budapest: The History of Kossuth Square*. Trans. Thomas J. and Helen D. DeKornfeld. CHSP Hungarian Studies Series 21. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 2009. 375 pp.

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Public Space in Budapest: The History of Kossuth Square is an unusual publication. Gerő's analysis of Kossuth Square composes less than one third of the book; the rest consists of newspaper reports, biographical notes of people directly and indirectly related to the square, and photographs depicting Kossuth Square at various points in history. *Public Space in Budapest* should be therefore welcome by researchers of Budapest's twentieth-century history because it does the bulk of the job for them. Particularly those with no knowledge of Hungarian will find here a compilation of otherwise hardly accessible sources (mostly cutouts from Hungarian daily newspapers, but also fragments of political speeches, bulletins, and announcements). Despite the suggestion inscribed in the subtitle, the book does not tell the history of Kossuth Square, but rather various stories connected by the author's analytical structure. Partly because of its fragmentary character and partly because of somewhat awkward translation into English, the book is not exactly an easy read; the amount of collected data, however, make it worth consulting by anyone interested in Budapest's history.

Gerő analyzes Kossuth Square from three different perspectives: the physical, the symbolic, and the spiritual. He defines the physical square as "a wide public space surrounded by buildings" (1). Initially, the square was to be surrounded only with public buildings, but in the late 1920s construction of private buildings was allowed. Gerő blames these early lax spatial regulations for the square's compromised unity. Towards the end of the authored section, Gerő expresses his opinion on how the square could be improved (i.e., through getting rid of the parking lots in front of the Parliament and closing the square at night, thus, eliminating the possibility of endless protests). After sharing his ideas for Kossuth Square on television in 2007, the historian was invited by Budapest's mayor to a meeting with the president of the national assembly. Parts of Gerő's concept have been incorporated in the national assembly's subsequent application request for Kossuth Square's renewal proposal, however, without its arguably most crucial element, namely an underground parking garage. The lack of the latter "shows the obsolescence of the square from the view of public needs" (100). Here, Gerő's reluctance to engage in a theoretical debate on the nature of public space is particularly regrettable.

In the section devoted to the symbolic square, Gerő discusses representations of politics and power. He observes that for most of its existence the national assembly had no real power as the power centers were located in the Buda Castle or in Moscow. Nevertheless, the Parliament "became fixed as a building of symbolic power" (29) and, together with its adjacent space, worked as a "political magnet" (29). Actually, before it was named Kossuth Square in 1927, the place had been called Parliament Square after the national assembly building inaugurated in 1896. Unlike many other streets and squares in Budapest, Kossuth Square held on to its name regardless of what regime was in power. The logic behind this phenomenon is straightforward: as "a shining star of Hungarian national consciousness" (5), Lajos Kossuth was of ideological use to all Hungarian political powers of the twentieth century.

Kossuth Square, as is to be expected of any functioning public space, hosts various non-political events such as an occasional installation of a skating rink or a Christmas tree, open-air concerts and film screenings, or a charity handball game (43). Gerő's focus, however, lies on representations of politics and power, among which he distinguishes manifestations of

power, manifestations of protest, memorial events and acts of political piety, and the "unclassifiable tragedy" of 1956. The first of the above, Gerő argues, are "organic component of the symbolic use of the square" (34). Aside from the obvious representation of the state that is the Parliament building, manifestations of power on Kossuth Square include historical legitimizations of a regime (such as dedication ceremonies of statues) and immediate political justifications of a regime, which happen relatively rarely, but involve large assemblies of people (e.g., the proclamation of the Hungarian republic on October 23, 1989). Manifestations of protest were at first associated with left-wing activities (e.g., protests by social democrats in 1905 and 1927 and by communists in 1919), but became more general at the end of the twentieth century and have since included gatherings by teachers, taxi drivers, investors, and many other interest groups who wanted their demands to be publicly heard. After the violently crashed uprising of 1956 and the subsequent period of social dormancy on Kossuth Square, public gatherings reemerged in the fall of 1988 culminating in the longest protest in the history of the square in 2006. The demonstration against the Gyurcsány government differed from others not only in its duration, but also in the hitherto uncommon accompanying forms and activities such as a tent camp, a mobile goulash kitchen, and even a "national rock music" stage (36).

Of the memorial events and acts of political piety, János Kádár's funeral ceremony in July 1989 strikes as most historically ironic. Kádár's catafalque was put up on display in the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party headquarters on the Széchenyi Embankment rather than on the much more prestigious Kossuth Square, but the line of mourners was so long that it not only reached the square, but intersected it. Thus, as Gerő remarks, "during the rapidly progressing change in the regime, Kossuth Square became indirectly involved in the manifestation of piety rendered to the leader of the post-1956 Communist regime" (40). Gerő refers to the bloody events of October 25, 1956 as an "unclassifiable tragedy" because, with about 80 killed and 150 wounded, it is "the only instance of mass murder in the square" (42) and a "politically motivated massacre" (43). The historical gravity of the 1956 uprising has inspired numerous memorials in post-1989 Budapest, some of which have been erected on Kossuth Square as both a memorial site and a representative public space.

In his historical analysis of Kossuth Square Gerő devotes most attention to the spiritual square (47-101), which he defines as "physical and intellectual" (47). Gerő argues that the rendition of the physical square into a spiritual square has been realized through the erection of monuments. The author shows no interest for the aesthetic and financial aspects of said monuments and focuses solely on "where," "when," and "how" Kossuth Square has been transformed spiritually. Gerő distinguishes four major steps, several sidesteps, and a few other phases of the square's spiritualization. The first step was the Andrassy statue unveiled in 1906 in the presence of Francis Joseph. Gerő finds the decision to commemorate Gyula Andrassy more than obvious since the prime minister "played a leading role in the creation and implementation of the prevailing political system, and assisted in solidifying the great-power position of the Monarchy" (61). It took sixteen years to agree on where exactly the memorial should stand and what form it should take. During that time, a spatial plan for what was then still called Parliament Square was completed, which designated space for at least four "spiritualizing objects" (58). The dynamics of the square was thus sealed at the very beginning of its existence, even if the objects of commemoration were to change several times in the twentieth century. The second step is the Kossuth statue. The idea to build it emerged right after Kossuth's death in 1894, but the memorial was not completed until 1927. Seven years later the István Tisza memorial was unveiled and in 1937 the fourth and final "spiritual" step on Kossuth Square was completed with the erection of the Ferenc II Rákóczi memorial.

As in other Central and East European cities, the wartime destruction of Budapest became an excuse to rid of ideologically uncomfortable statues, monuments, even entire buildings. Both the Andrásy statue and parts of the Tisza memorial were damaged, which made it easier for Budapest's postwar authorities to make them disappear. The former was removed as early as in 1945 because of the construction of a temporary bridge over the area where the statue stood. Eventually, Andrásy's place was given to the statue of Attila József, unveiled on the poet's 75th birthday in 1980. The Tisza memorial was repeatedly vandalized during the war, partly dismantled in 1945, and its remainder was removed in 1948. The choice of the replacement was particularly "politically perverse" (84): in 1975, the empty place on the square was filled with a statue of Mihály Károlyi, Tisza's famous adversary. As mentioned earlier, Kossuth was the perfect Hungarian hero embraced by all political powers. Still, the communist regime considered the original Kossuth statue too gloomy and therefore exchanged it in 1952 (on Kossuth's 150th birthday) with a rendering of Kossuth as a people's tribune, pointing forward with his right hand and altogether more agreeable to communist esthetics. The only one of the four original spiritual pillars that remained on Kossuth Square was the Rákóczi memorial.

After the system change of 1989, no one rushed to remove the statues on Kossuth Square. As soon as communism collapsed, the memorials lost the contextualization attributed to them by the regime and were hence rendered innocuous (unlike many other—more obviously communist—monuments that quickly disappeared from the public view). A truly spiritual explosion happened after 1989, particularly on the fortieth anniversary of the 1956 uprising. New plaques, street names, statues, busts, memorials, and other commemorating objects devoted to the victims of the tragic events of 1956 appeared across Budapest. Kossuth Square witnessed the erection of a symbolic grave, a monument depicting "the flame of the revolution," a few inscribed tablets, and an art installation ("bullets") on the façade of the Ministry of Agriculture, among others (92). Clearly, various interest groups were eager to add their own contributions to the long awaited commemoration of the victims of 1956, which resulted in an overbearing surplus of memorials. There was no single vision, no single initiative among the interested parties (including the city and the state) that would make it possible to create a single monument to 1956 on Kossuth Square. The "spiritual overcrowding" of the square was taken to new extremes with the unveiling of the Béla Kovács statue in 2002.

Just as it is impossible to tell *the* history of Kossuth Square, it is impossible to record *all* of its many stories; however, the absence of some stories is felt particularly intensely. Arguably, every historical book is marked by voids; the most remarkable void in *Public Space in Budapest: The History of Kossuth Square* is its almost complete lack of mention of Kossuth Square during World War II. The only events of that period Gerő refers to are the funerals of Count Pál Teleki in 1941 and István Horthy in 1942—both are mentioned in the authored section as well as in the carefully selected press reports and photographs that compose the bulk of the book. Since Arrow Cross's anti-Semitic attacks, general street violence, and street combat during the Battle of Budapest are well-known historical facts, Gerő's choice not to allude to them even in passing, not to mention a discussion on whether any of the above actually took place on Kossuth Square, strikes as disconcerting. After all, the Shoes on the Danube Promenade Memorial by Gyula Pauer and Can Togay (2005) dedicated to the Jewish victims of Arrow Cross militiamen is located only a few hundred meters south of Kossuth Square.