

# Politics and Political History in Hungary

## A Historiographical Outline

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Hungary used to be the world leader in the twentieth century. Reading that statement the reader rightly suspects excessive national pride on the side of the historian. Someone interested in the history of our country or our region will perhaps have heard that Hungary belonged to the vanguard of international sports, far outperforming the results that the country's size would justify. But are we saying that Hungary is the first in economic performance, culture, or science? Even those would not think of that who otherwise appreciate our efforts at harmonising plan and market, or like and appreciate Béla Bartók's music, or know about Hungarian Nobel-prize winners. In what other area could a country of such small proportions vindicate leading position?

A comparative study confirms this grandiloquent statement. Hungary is really the first in universal 20<sup>th</sup> century political history with its no less than eight changes of regime. In little more than seven decades revolutions, counter-revolutions, occupations, and new changes of regime followed each other.

The twentieth-century Hungarian political stage changed fast and frequently: new repertoire, new stage design, and new actors. Few plays, more tragedies, hardly any comedies, sometimes even tragicomedy.

In October 1918 a bourgeois democratic revolution put an end to the history of Austria-Hungary and the Habsburg

Monarchy. In little less than half a year the Hungarian Soviet Republic was proclaimed in Budapest. The dictatorship of the proletariat was terminated through a military interference with the help of the Entente powers. There came the counter-revolution, and the lop-sided Monarchy without a monarch, in which parliamentarianism was based on limited political freedom and a restricted right of voting.

In March 1944 German forces occupied the country without any noteworthy resistance. In October, after an attempted coup, equalling a tragicomedy, the Hungarian fascists came to power. They were ousted by the Soviet Army. In the eastern part of the country, liberated by that time, the Provisional National Assembly and the Provisional National Government were formed in December. A new political arrangement was brought about at the initiative of the Soviets, based on a wide alliance of parties, involving even the control by private capital, called people's democracy at the time.

Even that was quite short-lived. Between the autumn of 1947 and June 1948 a single party remained on the political stage, and the sovietisation of the country started on its way. An uprising broke out in eight years time fought by desperate citizens wanting to replace dictatorship by democracy, and attempting to realise socialism within the framework of national sovereignty recaptured. Eventually the Soviet army put down the national fight for independence. Between 1957 and 1989 state socialism in Hungary was enriched by more and more individual features pointing toward an independent pattern. Then, by way of conclusion, a peaceful transition came from socialism to capitalism, from single-party dictatorship to multi-party parliamentary democracy.

Much pain, conflict, and commenced but not concluded struggle have characterised the recent history of the Hungarian people. In the present brief introduction we wish to touch upon two issues in a sketchy manner rather than exhaustively so as to generate interest, and help create

a context in which to interpret the main message of our publication. What is the reason behind so many revolutions, and changes of regime? What effect did political turbulence have on Hungarian (political) history writing?

1. It would be too easy to point to national character as the reason of such a long sequence of dramatic twists and turns in Hungarian political history. But scholars attributing a decisive role to external factors, or the international political landscape in twentieth-century Hungarian history also have good arguments to prove their point. The latter tend to refer not only to the games of the great powers, but also call our attention to controversies of economic development, and the isolation of nations freshly organised into states. They regard tense Hungarian internal political life swerving back and forth a response to an externally defined track and a restricted space of manoeuvre. Sceptical historians observing these phenomena from a long distance, or political scientists sensing the coercive conditions of world economy could even say looking at the results: "Much ado about nothing."

Well, actually not about nothing. If all the struggle—often so fierce—had been fought for no purpose other than grasping and maintaining power, then the revolutions would not have broken out, and would not have been put down either. The whole point is that these revolutions in Hungary never remained inside the otherwise wide domain of power and politics. In the majority of cases the initiators of political revolutions wanted to bring about radical changes in social-economic conditions, mechanisms, and arrangements. That is exactly the true characteristic feature: Hungarian society wanted to change its own living conditions, circumstances many times, and at a large scale.

I would like to highlight a few correlations that together, in interaction with each other made recent Hungarian history and politics so eventful. Challenges of modernisation and frequent crises arriving in rapid succession failed to leave enough time to economic, social, and cultural

processes already underway to unfold, and for the transition process to complete. Problems of displaced social layers and classes piled up, but meanwhile the newly emerging layers could not feel safe either. Whilst groups in motion were justified to believe that the conditions created during a “long period” were hindering the development so desirable for the entire nation, others were reluctant to understand why they had to pay the price of that whole “business”. That state of affairs with their unstable conditions and struggles with varying outcomes failed to create a favourable atmosphere for the consolidation, and the strengthening of the middle class and the middle layers of society. There was no social structure majority of which was formed by the middle bourgeoisie, the urban workers’ class rising out of proletariat existence to the bottom level of affluence, the wealthy peasantry or at least peasants able to make ends meet from their land, and the intellectuals not confined to serve the needs of those holding political power, and the civil servants possessing public administrative knowledge. Moreover, wars, revolutions, economic crises hindered, and obstructed the proliferation of exactly this middle stratum.

The lack of existential safety, unresolved economic, social, and national problems repeatedly embroiled the whole Hungarian society into politics. Competing political formations were usually not strong enough to impose their own will onto the others, and to devise and implement a credible programme. But participants of politics generally had the strength and inventiveness to obstruct their opponents in carrying out their plans and intentions. That competition between “those not strong enough, and those not weak” undermined the positions of the actors and parties in the centre, qualifying as moderate in public life. Even the crowds entering the political arena, struggling to make a living could not identify with them. The multitudes rejected from public politics—but confined to support it, a significant part of the population, were mostly attracted to

the radical movements offering quick and comprehensive solutions. The regular appearance of masses in public life, and the repeated politicising of society resulted in the fact that parties became increasingly sensitised to their needs and feelings. It was no longer so easy for political leaders to wash their hands as is customary after an election victory: we would like to do it very much, but the budget, and the country's current position makes it impossible for us to keep our promises. Centrist forces could only gain temporary political influence in this crises-ridden atmosphere. The rule of thumb was polarisation, and so seeking compromises became less of an imperative.

This is why in Hungarian political life mutually exclusive alternatives regularly overcame each other and succeeded each other in power. The tendency was shaded by the fact that when they managed to stay in power for a longer period, the radical trends were gradually tamed, and undertook to represent the interests of the middle social layers. That solution helped the political forces that had acquired power through violence, and/or external help maintain their political hegemony and create their legitimacy. This is what happened to the national conservative Right after 1920, and with the communists in the 1960s.

This situation was further exacerbated by the pressure and competition of leading economic countries, and world politics. These external factors carried specific labels. And it was by no way possible to disguise the changing external environment simply as world market or modernisation. It was more and different than that. Hungary was wedged among competing, hostile powers intent on either involving us in their sphere of interest, or neutralise us, but keeping us in a subordinate position at any rate. Those powers were competing with each other even in ideological terms, and were building diverging systems.

National socialist in argument with liberal capitalism, and third-way ideologies exerted significant influence—not only in their own right, but also as a result of the then

current status of international power relations—on the political behaviour of Hungarian society. The gradual gaining ground of the Great Powers, and their alternate presence in the region played a major role in such a frequent succession of social systems in East-Central Europe.

Hungary's national problems arising from its war damages, i.e. its integrating role in the region, the loss of its medium-power status, the general desperation following 1920 due to its shrinking territory all jeopardised the interests of the victorious powers and countries as they constituted a risk for the Versailles-Trianon peace settlement as well as the status quo confirmed by the Treaty of Paris in 1947. It was particularly difficult to digest that one third of Hungarians living in their homeland suddenly found themselves outside the borders of the country and became a minority.

The frequent revolutionary changes brought about just as many changes of elite. Power, easy to grasp following economic crises, military defeats, external interventions was equally easy to lose. There was a major clash between narrow, externally determined manoeuvring space, an economy of limited performance, and society's expectations with regard to politics. These raised standards were generated to a large extent by political actors fighting each other and trying to eliminate each other. It was hard for parties to come closer to a society suffering from severe troubles simply by minor improvements, re-adjustments, and smaller reforms. It was imperative to promise extremists radical changes, combined with a hope for a rapid rise in living standards. Meanwhile the Right, achieving a hegemony following World War I blamed the revolutions for the humiliation that the nation had to experience. The victorious counter-revolution lifted the issue of territorial revision above all other priorities. This is how it attempted to avoid having to comply with social and modernisation-related expectations. The radical, communist Left coming to power, set about implementing its programme, i.e.

reforming ownership conditions, and the economy, but failed, until 1956, at delivering on its promises of welfare. This double undertaking was rarely fulfilled in Hungary in the twentieth century. Only two politicians, István Bethlen, and János Kádár had time enough to implement their own policies, and thus they managed to consolidate a disjointed society.

It was not possible for decades to remedy the grievances inflicted on national existence and national identity. Groups of the old and new elite blamed each other for the destiny of the nation, and found the scapegoat in each other. Their innocence, i.e. the fact that the parties coming to power could not work any major effect on the failed system, now proved a benefit as they could start with a clear record. New actors accused the previous leadership of betraying and destroying the nation. Those, who, in the hope of remedying national grievances or preventing a major conflict created an alliance with a great power holding a regional hegemony, experienced serious difficulty when that power was defeated or marginalised. What previously seemed an external compulsion for the country, or better, a necessary choice, i.e. the fact that one has to yield to the pressure of a great power hoping to achieve national objectives, later turned out to be a basically wrong decision. The alliance with fascist Germany (Horthy) drove the country to an abyss, and shook its national existence in 1944. Later a similar alliance, even though with a modified content—the policy of yielding to the Soviet Union in order to achieve internal autonomy (Kádár)—qualified as an unacceptable compromise.

Each change of regime offered a chance to the new elite to re-allocate social and economic positions. All mistakes, errors of the former period were suddenly blamed as free decisions of sovereign actors, premeditated wrongdoings, moreover, treasons for which the perpetrators must be made to suffer the consequences. Turbulent Hungarian history offered abundant examples for that. Yet, for our

current subject these cases only deserve attention due to their role in creating scapegoats, because interpreting the recent past on that basis provided a possibility of mutual political revenge to the groups newly rising to power and the old élite. And the past fraught with sins justified the elimination and the marginalisation of the old élite.

2. The fast-changing political winds and the creation of scapegoats have brought Hungarian contemporary historians and political historians in a rather peculiar position. One reason is that issues of the recent past have remained a constant subject in day-to-day politics. Another is that the winning political trend is simultaneously placing two orders with historical science, historians, lawyers, economist, and writers dealing with the recent past. (Let us not forget: up to the 1960s social sciences endeavouring to explore the present-day such as sociology, or political sciences until the 1980s could not formalise in Hungary.)

One of the two orders was uncovering the true nature and the sins of the previous political elite. The other order was to reveal the true nature and the actual story, previously falsified, and kept secret, of the new elite. Satisfying these two political expectations and requirements were a major temptation and a real challenge, and those trying to deliver stood on rather thin ice. The new government and the new elite exerted great pressure on historians because the somewhat more distant past as the antecedent of evil and the opponent's ideology as the original sin had to form part of the explanation of the recent past. In that sense political history writing itself became politics.

The last political changes of the twentieth century, having taken place in 1989/90 did not assume the form of a revolution. There was no uprising leading to bourgeois democracy and to capitalist market economy. Transition was peaceful. The reasons for it and its circumstances are not subjects of the present introduction. However, two observations have to be made. One is that such a scenario indicates that Hungarian society has learnt a great deal, if

not the whole lesson, about changing regimes. That is why the transition could be peaceful. The other: although this last change of political elites involved a smaller group, the usual rule worked even this time. Even now the political “order” has been placed. The difference as compared to earlier changes of régime was that a “tamed” Left, coming to terms with reality, recognising that its own resources were running out—one could even risk the term: a moderate Left—handed over its position to a right-of-centre, similarly non-radical coalition of peaceful endeavours, wishing to create real democracy and a social market economy. All this along with the social expectation to preserve calm imposed discipline on the political elite that placed the order and the participants of intellectual struggles.

Social sciences and, more specifically, contemporary history did not come to the events of 1989 unshielded. Nonetheless, it owed major debts, especially in the area of political history (1956, the presentation of the Soviet role, etc.). In Hungary, however, national self-knowledge, and a sense of reality required for elaborating the reforms, the endeavours of the government, and the intellectuals to find the right way gave encouragement to economic sciences, law, sociology, and history. Remaining with the latter point and with the same period, one could say that history papers written in the 1970s and the 1980s already offer a better balanced assessment of the Horthy era, and increasingly objective descriptions were prepared concerning the period of the people’s democracy, and the 1950s. Comprehensive, in-depth investigations and analyses were undertaken on economic history, sociology, public administration, and political sciences, often at the assignment of a specific political actor.

Historiography of the new period had to take account of these new results. This is how a trend was gaining ground which I am tempted to label “uncovering” historiography, which committed itself to revealing the illegal acts of the previous period, the role of the secret police, and the me-

chanism of political oppression. There is no problem with that trend as long as it does not serve direct political aims, and as long as it does not apply its findings to the entirety of society, economy, the political world, and culture.

Contemporary historiography is gradually recovering from earlier diseases. Although historical issues do return to the domain of day-to-day politics in Hungary with some regularity, and political opponents are sometimes still required to admit the sins of their predecessors, those attempts become increasingly less significant. Today the conditions are in place for the independent development of contemporary historiography.

The 90s saw major achievements in the research of contemporary history. Numerous important source-publications have appeared. The authoritative story of 1956 has been reconstructed. Progress has been made in the presentation of retaliations. Significant summaries are now available. New trends in history have likewise exerted an obvious effect on contemporary Hungarian historical research. If social history and political history are successfully linked up, and external sources become available, it will constitute a new step forward. It would be similarly important to prepare a more comprehensive comparison of the history of East-Central European countries.

The Institute of Political History was in no enviable position when it took the place of the Party History Institute of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. It lost the privileges of its predecessor. The change of regime devalued all results achieved earlier on this front: moving from classic glorifying party history writing toward generic history, and endeavouring to present the past objectively, opening up to social history, etc.

In the past fifteen years our Institute has focused most of its attention on contemporary issues. Our researchers have made a major step forward in researching the Kádár era capitalising on the fact that sources have been made available until 1989. We began to tackle completely new

subjects such as elections in the twentieth century, electoral behaviour, political media history, and the history of Hungarian social democracy has also been given more attention. Apart from that, we intend to integrate the approach of historical anthropology and micro-historiography by inviting young researchers so that we can cultivate political history in a new, social history context. The public nature of democracy enables the analysis of important events in the present and the most recent past with scientific methods, if not relying exclusively on archive sources, at least with the eye of the historiographer.

Our present publication provides an overview of the decade and a half spent on that effort. The papers published herein fail to provide a full picture of twentieth century Hungarian political history, but—so I hope—they help the reader understand it better.

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