

Fabricating Authenticity in Soviet Hungary. The Afterlife of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in the Age of State Socialism. By Péter Apor. London–New York: Anthem Press, 2014. 228 pp.

At the end of 1956, after the Hungarian revolt, János Kádár's communist leadership had to answer some crucial questions. How could his despised, de facto illegitimate government obtain legitimacy and justify itself in the eyes of the population? How could the regime deprive the 1956 revolutionaries of their identity as freedom fighters and enforce a new negative image of them as murderers, fascists and counterrevolutionaries? The answer lay partly in fabricating a new historical narrative based on the merciless struggle between progressive, revolutionary forces and forces of counterrevolution in twentieth-century Hungary. The source of this battle was found in the obscure and controversial history of the establishing and downfall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. As a result, "within the two and a half years that passed between October 1956 and March 1959, from the Communist perspective the Soviet Republic was transformed from a relatively insignificant event in the party's own history into the most important anniversary of the nation" (p.155).

Péter Apor's book meticulously analyses this process of revision, as well as the creation of a new interpretation of Hungarian history in the twentieth century. One of the primary aims during the early years of Kádár's government was to create direct continuity between the actors of 1919 and 1956 and to construct a narrative of October 1956 as an integral part of the story based on the continuous revolution and counterrevolution, which started with the White Terror that followed the fall of Soviet Republic (p.1). In this narrative, the heritage of the anti-communist persecutions of 1919–1921 played a role as important as the "progressive tradition" of Béla Kun's Soviet Republic. It allowed for the creation of the chronological sequence of violent counterrevolutionary attempts, beginning with the White Terror, then the mass murders committed by Szálasi's fascist Arrow Cross Party in 1944/45, and concluding (allegedly) with the atrocities of the 1956 revolt.

These events were presented as historical manifestations of the rule of one essentially unchanging, continuous destructive force directed against all progressive, antifascist groups, particularly the communists. According to this narrative, it was precisely the communists, the most cruelly persecuted victims of these tragic events in Hungarian history, who got the historical task

of protecting Hungarians against the perils of counterrevolution and, more importantly, against the return of its perpetrators to power.

However, as the title of the book suggests, it does not deal only with the problem of the instrumentalization of the history and the creation of the new post-Stalinist narrative. Apor is much more concerned with the following question: “What makes abstract historical interpretations authentic?” (p.1). He thus analyses the creation of a new post-Stalinist metanarrative, “a body of discourse which presents a simplified form of the ideology and which is the vehicle of communication between the regime and those who live under it,” by projecting “a conception of society that explains both past current reality and future trajectory.”<sup>1</sup> In order to win society’s acceptance of this metanarrative, party historians and ideologists had to offer a virtual reality comprised of myths and supported by carefully chosen symbols. The post-1956 communist regime had to introduce a meaningful symbolic politics expressed through an interconnected network of interrelated objects, texts, persons and events in order to amalgamate the various representations of the Soviet Republic into a system of cross-references, interconnectedness and self-reflection (p.23). Apor concentrates on the concept of authenticity as an essential precondition of the establishment of the success of the new memory constructions. According to Apor, historical representations have their histories, and his book “strives to describe the web that connects creative imagination and the objects of representation, as well as historical traditions mobilized by the modalities and means of representation” (p.21).

The book is divided into the five chapters (plus an introduction and epilogue), covering the changing interpretations of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic between 1949 and 1959. However, at the same time, the chapters constitute case studies dealing with distinct symbols crucial for the legitimization of the post-1956 metanarrative. Each of these five parts offers a different perspective and analyses a special aspect of the state symbolic politics. Apor’s interest includes language, visual media and orchestrated rituals, as well as judicial decisions, places of memory and of course official historiography. The broad scope of primary sources and methodological approaches utilized for their analysis constitutes the most significant positive virtue of the monograph.

The first part, “Prefiguration,” analyses the historical interpretation of the Soviet regime during the Rákosi dictatorship. It shows why the regime could

---

1 Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

not and did not want to appeal to the traditions of the previous Soviet regime or see it as a direct predecessor of postwar communist Hungary. Although the revolutionary year 1919 officially counted as one of the progressive events of the country's history, it was at the same time a controversial topic for the Stalinist historiography of the early 1950s, and the commemorations remained unpopular events for large segments of Hungarian society. For the communist ideologists, it was therefore easier to present the Party as the heir of the 1848/49 revolution than as a descendant of the short-lived experiment, the leaders of which perished during Stalin's purges.

The second chapter, "Resurrection," deals with the creation of the historical connection between the White Terror and 1956 revolt in order to legitimize the measures that were taken by Kádár's government against the allegedly "counterrevolutionary" forces. In the narrative about the continuity of the counterrevolution, the story of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was nearly completely overshadowed by the focus on the White Terror. As Apor demonstrates by citing the example of the so-called White Books about the atrocities of 1956, the abstract connection between 1919 and 1956 was authenticated by the similarity of the two cases, especially by visualizing the use of physical violence against the communists.

The following chapter, entitled "Lives," is devoted to the trials of war criminals. The life stories of the perpetrators of the White Terror were used to strengthen the thesis of permanent counterrevolution in Hungary. In this case, the legal evidence should have authenticated the historical narrative and "populated" the existing abstract constructions. Apor states that, in the end, the Hungarian communists were unable to "demonstrate the direct tangible physical continuity between the actors of 1919 and 1956," and they had to "rely on vague implications of family relationships and blurred conceptions of blood ties," which made the whole narrative "unconvincingly abstract, ineffective and, in fact, ridiculous" (p.86). However, given the general communist obsession with "class origin" and the widespread belief that the negative traits of "bourgeois roots" are more or less hereditary (a notion the influence of which can be observed already at the beginning of the communist movement), "conceptions of blood ties" were probably not so absurd and unbelievable as the author assumes, at least not to the people involved in the construction of the metanarrative.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 See the words of the Chekist from 1921: "The first question you must ask is: what class does [the accused] belong to, what education, upbringing, origin, or profession does he have? These questions must

The chapter “Funeral” is devoted to the planning, building and unveiling of the very specific sepulcher, the Pantheon of the Labor Movement. In this monument, the historical continuity of revolutionaries “was crystallized around the bodies of the dead” (p.22). In this case, Apor refers to the medieval notion of the mystical body that played a crucial role in the self-construction of the party. He uses the arguments of E. H. Kantorowicz regarding the medieval royal tombs, and states that “the troubles with the search for communities in the late 1950s [...] resulted in similar ideas in diverse contexts: the idea that the mere gathering of individuals in some mystical way shaped by the power of religion, law or politics could be transformed into a thoroughly distinct quality, a genuine community” (p.137). However, one should also note dead kings and queens were buried in royal tombs in succession, regardless of their deeds. This was a means of reinforcing the legitimacy of the dynasty, and not only the current ruler. The Pantheon of the Labor Movement, which represented a formal celebration of the communist movement in general, in fact gave legitimacy only to the Kádár’s party leadership. The dead who were buried there had to be selected and approved by the current ruler, while his predecessors were explicitly excluded from the list.<sup>3</sup>

The fifth chapter, “Narration,” is dedicated to the historical scholarship, fiction and documentaries on paper, on film or as exhibitions in museums based on the newly created narrative introduced as part of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In contrast with the interpretation presented in 1949, ten years later the Soviet Republic was characterized not by its alleged mistakes, but by its glorious achievements. What was even more important, it provided a perfect means of clarifying “basic ideological-political issues related to the interpretation of revolution and counterrevolution, Communist revisionism, nationalism and socialist patriotism without the need to openly address the revolt in 1956” (p.168).

Apor’s work concludes that, in the end, the attempt to fabricate a new authenticity failed. The book offers enough evidence to prove this point. It was nearly impossible to link the abstract ideological statements to comprehensible

---

determine the accused’s fate.” Quoted in: Edward Kanterian, “Communism: The Shadows Of A Utopia,” *Baltic Worlds* 7, no. 4 (2014): 4–11, 8. See also: Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History* 65, no. 4 (1993): 745–70.

3 This was because the form of succession in the Eastern European communist parties was much closer to the byzantine (or Russian czarist) tradition of conquering the throne by defeating the predecessor than it was to the hereditary tradition of the western kingdoms.

accounts because the implied story was full of blanks, contradictions and silences, while the First Hungarian Soviet Republic remained largely lacking in credibility and appeal. This failure then resulted in the mutually accepted politics of “deliberate amnesia.” As a consequence of an unspoken compromise between the communist leadership and Hungarian society, mention simply ceased to be made of the 1956 revolt. The counterrevolutionary narrative was formally respected, but in reality lost its plausibility. But can be such a situation really defined as failure? In the light of Havel’s “The Power of the Powerless,” one may well ask, is it really necessary for people to believe as long as they act as if they believe? Does it matter whether there was any genuine widespread conviction, or is it sufficient for the rituals to be held and for the principles of the metanarrative to be observed?<sup>4</sup> However, Apor makes no such inquires.

The book lacks comparative context, even if the author briefly refers to the situation in the other communist countries in the introduction. It is perhaps unfair to make this demand, since this book was not meant to be a comparative study. However, occasional reference to the international context would help the reader better understand which processes were specific to the Hungarian case and which were generic traits present elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc. The post-1968 developments in Czechoslovakia in particular would have provided ideal material for occasional comparisons.

The monograph mentions (albeit only as a side note) that the history of the First Soviet Republic had a clear nationalist undertone in the sense of a patriotic war against newly established Hungarian neighbors (p.201). This is an interesting point which would have merited further reflection and development. The communist regimes everywhere routinely relied on nationalist (patriotic) argumentation to make their narratives more acceptable.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of this approach in the case of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic would bring one more interesting aspect to the problem of creating the post-1956 metanarrative.

I would venture one more minor critical remark concerning the frequent references to the early Christian and medieval politics of symbols and rituals.

---

4 Gill, *Symbols*, 273. See also: Michal Pullmann, “Konec experimentu.” *Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* [End of an Experiment. Rebuilding and Fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia] (Prague: Scriptorium, 2011).

5 See: Frank Hadler, “Drachen und Drachentöter. Das Problem der nationalgeschichtlichen Fixierung in den Historiographien Ostmitteleuropas nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in *Die Nation schreiben. Geschichtswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Christoph Conrad and Sebastian Conrad (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 137–64.

Apor does not always adequately explain the relevance of such comparisons with communist symbolic politics.

However, these few objections notwithstanding, Apor's book offers a fascinating, sophisticated and multifaceted analysis of the communist memory politics and politics of history in a communist regime. The scope and number of primary and secondary sources is truly admirable. It clearly demonstrates profound research and is ample testimony to the erudition of the author. In this sense, Apor's book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of communist power from the perspective of symbolic politics. It offers an admirable example of how to deconstruct the processes of fabricating history in the socialist dictatorships. As such, it is an important work on the history of communist regimes in the Central and Eastern Europe.

Adam Hudek