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1956 Declared as an Operational Zone – 1989-2006

The incidents surrounding our recent anniversary focused attention on a problem, which is related to the commemoration of 1956. There is a slight connection between the forms of remembrance and the historians' discourse – i.e. everything that had taken place in *this operational zone*. A very important chapter in the historians' discourse on 1956 began in 1989 and it is just possible that it has now ended.

In talking about the post-1989 state of research into the 1956 revolution, I need to clarify my situation before going any further. I cannot address this topic with the objectivity and critical distance that it is usually expected. Because I have been deeply involved in this research, in reviewing the events of the past 15 years I shall *also* relate my personal story.

In the following first I would like to talk about the changes in 1989, which added a new dimension to the historiography of the recent past. Next I shall cover the new tracks and results of research, along with the problems studied. In the third section I shall briefly review the debates related to 1956.

1. A Survey of the Situation in 1989

In 1989 the historiography of the Hungarian revolution could already look back on a three-decade long past. Right up to the democratic transitions in Eastern and Central Europe, this historiography was fundamentally determined by the following specific aspects:

- a. Because of linguistic difficulties, the contributors were mainly Hungarians, at least as far as the more comprehensive and longer works were concerned;
- b. There was essentially no connection between the western discourse, which was strongly controlled by the Hungarian émigré circles, and the Communist historiography back home, while both sides continuously felt to be in a debating situation;

c. The dominant interpretational framework of the 1956 revolution was political history and Kremlinology, while the paradigm was totalitarianism.

In a number of ways, 1989 brought immediate and fundamental changes. Research and public speech about our recent history became free and multicolored. Contemporary archival sources for the entire period after 1945 were made accessible. The international relations in the research of contemporary history were restored. The memory of 1956 played a key role in Hungary's democratic transition. The legitimacy of the Kádár regime rested on a complicated regime of concessions, freedoms and donations to society. When these (especially the rise in the standard of living) no longer proved viable on economic grounds, the legitimacy weakened. The public discourse on recent history helped to make people conscious of this process. The prosecutor based his case on crimes committed in the past, yet the Kádár regime, which stood trial, was still very much alive. Its principal crimes were the crushing of the 1956 revolution and the execution of some of the participants, including Imre Nagy, whose person had by then acquired symbolic significance.

The strange situation, which emerged in 1989, has partly continued to determine historiography about the revolution. The earlier, Marxist-Leninist interpretation immediately disappeared, and its influence vanished. A powerful demand for "objectivity" emerged, based on the misconception that every interpretation worked in a similar fashion as the Communist one. According to this notion, historians are probably lying, while the contemporary documents have the capacity "to speak for themselves", as it were. In its milder version, it was willing to take a slightly more favorable view of the historians' narrative, but it still regarded as authentic only those chronicles, which lacked in interpretation. On the other hand, it placed the obligation of telling the "true story", of immortalizing the "heroes' deeds", squarely on the historians. The personal recollections about the past played the same role. 1956 and recent history have become part of the public speech. The facts must be uncovered, the blank spots filled in, and justice served: these were common beliefs, which grew out of the conviction that until 1989 there had been essentially no work on remembering the past and the events had been forgotten by all. And as for the historians, they believed – *we believed* – that after 1989 the political connotations and the political actualization of contemporary history would go out of practice.

This has proven to be an illusion. “We never expected that the debate about the character, the objectives, the main forces and the leaders of the revolution could once again flare up, and that the faith issue of *revolution* versus *counter-revolution* could return and persist at the 1956-1957 level of intensity,” György Litván, the founder of the *1956-os Intézet* (1956 Institution), wrote in 1992. But could it really have happened in any other way? The main actors of the 1989 democratic transition drew their legitimacy from 1956, which therefore constituted considerable political capital and heritage. Then these actors all went their separate ways, and often found themselves at loggerheads with each other. In any case, Hungary has a long tradition of the political exploitation of the past. Although after 1989 the historians accepted its role in “revealing the facts”, the latent interpretative urge still worked. Whether we wanted it or not.

2. The areas and dynamics of research since 1989

The institutional system of contemporary history has changed very little since 1989; the few changes that did take place mainly concerned the emergence of a couple of new institutions. As shown by the *Vademekum*, the archival system has remained intact. The institution of branch archives has long existed in Hungary, parallel with the network of central government archives and the regional archives. One of the most important new branch archives is the previously mentioned Historical Archive of the State Security Services. (With regard to the nature of the documents held here, this institution corresponds to the “Institution of National Memory” in Poland, Slovakia, etc., although it essentially works as an archive in Hungary. In the functional sense, no such institution exists in Hungary.) We also included in our list the central archives of the four most important churches (sometimes referred to as the *historical* churches). These institutes, which are open to the lay public, hold numerous important source documents of public history. Generally, the departments of modern history are the ones that carry out research work on contemporary history within the various universities; the number of these departments has essentially remained unchanged – naturally, the number of students has multiplied since 1989, just as it has done in every other area in the country. The Academy’s network of research institutions has survived and – after substantial reforms and under a new name, the institute of Political History – so has the former Institute of Party History. The latter,

along with the research institutes established after the democratic transition (1956 Institute, 20th-Century Institute), is strictly concerned with contemporary history (1945-1990), and it is subsidized by the state (the government).

After 1989 the volume of information about the revolution expanded spectacularly. Within 15 years it has become perhaps the best-researched period in Hungarian history. The most important research areas, which produced the most results, are as follows:

- a) On the top of the list is the international context of 1956. As a consequence of the so-called *archival revolution*, the crucial documents of the Soviet and the American perception and decision-making have partly become accessible. As one of the critical moments of the Cold War, 1956 came to be in the focus of attention of the new historiography of the Cold War. This culminated in the 1996 international conference of historians in Budapest and also in the publication and interpretation of the so-called “Malin notes”.
- b) The individual and collective biographies of a number of participants have been completed (Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter, the armed insurgents, etc.).
- c) A broad-scale publication of source documents began, which included the documents of the central authorities (party, government, the commands of the armed forces), the press and the radio broadcasts, dairies, the documentations of the central and the local revolutionary organizations and also the documents originating from the period of retaliation.
- d) The research of the personal histories of 1956 also began, using oral history sources. Since the early 2000s, an increasing attention has been dedicated to the changing history of commemorating the revolutions.
- e) In addition, a large number of monographs came out about the 1956 revolution, of varying quality. 1956 finally took the place it rightly deserved in the new monographs and textbooks on 20th-century Hungarian history.
- f) Historical research came to provide the basis of countless documentaries, television programs and Internet-based services on 1956. The new, popular media created a huge demand for the research results. A large number of the historians dealing with contemporary history now offer a *service*. A genuine memorial industry, or history industry, emerged with the help of professional experts.

In summary: Since the democratic transition, the literature on contemporary Hungarian history has been characterized by the over-representation of political history. The public discussions are also strongly linked to political history. It is quite clear that this is the area where researchers have the easiest job of uncovering new details in consequence of the “archival revolution”. While for a good ten years after 1989 the interest was focused on the 1956 revolution, the Communist takeover, the Rákosi regime, the “new era” and the retaliations after 1956, it now seems certain that the great topic of the 2000s will be the Kádár period. The prolonged nature of the process is likely to change the one-sided approach that has prevailed until now. It is probable that political history will be complemented with social and cultural history, and that local and micro-history will also be gaining grounds. In this respect, the favorite type of source documents of contemporary Hungarian history, the papers of the state security services, offer excellent material.

3. Public Debates and Historians' Debates

What marked conceptual differences emerged in the scholarly interpretation of 1956 after the democratic transition? Differences seem less marked as far as the *scholarly interpretation* is concerned. Although under very different circumstances, today's literature more or less follows the line of the discussions that have been going on for 40 or 45 years. The major fault-line in this discourse emerged already at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. The leftwing, post-Marxist historiography, which viewed the history of Soviet-type socialism as an unfinished story, considered the Hungarian revolution as one of the most hopeful attempts to leave behind Stalinism. By contrast, those who thought of the Soviet-type socialism as a closed case saw 1956 as an anti-totalitarian and/or national insurgence, revolution or struggle for liberation. In this early literature, too, the chronicle-type accounts exerted the greatest influence, which portrayed the events, the individuals and the groups in vivid colors and strove for presenting human values thought to be the most universal. These accounts were mostly written by eyewitnesses. In any case, the eyewitness accounts generated the greatest attention and had the most success.

After 1989, historiography more or less followed the same pattern. The greater part of the historical narratives about 1956 fitted into the line of various chronicles. The history of the Soviet system, along with the attempts to reform it, has ended, and

Marxist contemporary history was on the defensive, so now the dominant interpretative framework of 1956 originated from the theory of totalitarianism. In the early 1990s, a brief study published jointly by the 1956 Institute and Tankönyvkiadó (Textbook Publishers) – actually a popular science publication – prompted the only real public debate in connection with the history of the revolution. The two main participants of the debate were György Litván and László Tökéczky. While they shared the view that the revolution had an anti-totalitarian character, Litván and Tökéczky disagreed on whether the program of social reforms or the program of national liberation had been the crucial feature of the events.

Although this debate was conducted by historians, it basically reflected the same political/ideological divide, which characterized public opinion in Hungary. However, the discourse itself remained rather one-sided for a considerable time. The political side of the national-conservative elements made an extremely conscious attempt to develop its own line of historical traditions. It was also determined to fit 1956 into this construction. Since this tradition was based on the idea of the Hungarian state's thousand-year-old continuity, 1956 became a towering yet disjointed episode in the historical cul-de-sac between 1945 and 1990. The national-conservative side was not averse to the idea of canonizing, either.

By contrast, the side of the social democratic elements in Hungary remained remarkably hesitant. It was almost as if they had nothing to say about 1956. The reason was obvious: they simultaneously tried to fit into their traditions the social democratic line, which was broken in 1948 and then briefly revived in 1956, and a certain part of the political heritage of Kádár's HWSP. In 1956 these two were antagonistically opposed. 1956 always presented a clear choice: social democracy or Kádár. The hesitation had been over by the early 2000s. The leftwing values of today's western democracies (most notably, of Great Britain) became the constant frame of reference. 1956 was gradually incorporated into the leftwing/progressive tradition, and also became its end point. The silence on Kádár's heritage continues. There is not much historical debate on 1956 in today's Hungary. Nor is there any debate on the two factors that can shed light on the true significance of the revolution: the Kádár era and the problems of commemoration and celebration (although with regard to the latter, the so-called "informer scandals" stirred up some mud. But these problems are, and will be, present on the horizon of Hungarian historiography. There is a new generation of historians ready to make their mark, who have a different

sensitivity towards the problems, and who have a more disciplined approach to methodology. The merger of these two elements will, in all likelihood, initiate not only the historical debate, but also the debate between historians -- not just on 1956, but also on its consequences. That type of ethical commitment, which characterized the historiography of the democratic transition, either will disappear or will be transformed.