

**History in the first Parliament:  
The Politics of Memory in Hungary 1990-1994**

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In the transition to democracy Hungary could be remembered not only for its early political reforms but also as a country in which the leading party itself started to investigate its recent history at an early stage. In 1989 several symbolic political actions also took place such as a new interpretation of 1956, the reburial of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, and the declaration of the republic on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, i.e. precisely on the anniversary of the 1956 revolution.

In this paper we will take a step ahead and examine how the new Hungarian Parliament conducted debates on historical matters in the 1990s. The idea of this approach is based on the view that professional historians and scholars are ultimately one group of several who interpret and reinterpret the past. This is because the media or politicians deal with history and interpret and reinterpret the past in their comments and speeches. Dieter Langewiesche has noted that all six presidents of the Federal Republic of Germany commented on and interpreted the German past in speeches made to the public. Furthermore, as Bo Stråth has argued, myth and memory are history but in a process of constant transformation, so that the distinction between history and memory as opposites can no longer be maintained.<sup>1</sup>

However, we have to bear in mind that the debates in Hungary were not unique in the 1990s, and the situation could be seen as an example of a broader discussion after the collapse of communism.

Moral and political problems can be found, for example, in dealing with the past in general, purges or the restriction of 'men of the past' from participating in contemporary political life. In this sense there are also many other examples from other countries such as The Truth Commission in the Republic of South Africa, Chile in the 1990s or the long-standing discussion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany. In those debates during, and particularly after a political change, the past, the meaning of it and how the past is dealt with in general are discussed.

In the context of the Hungarian situation it is argued here that the debates in Parliament were not only an interlude at the turn of the decade or just the consequences of the limited discussion and the taboos of the communist era. Instead, they are connected to Hungarian political culture which, in the view of the present author, is strongly bound up with earlier orientations of historical argumentation. Secondly, they dealt with difficult political questions of morality, justice and identity; and therefore they were intimately connected to the very nature of nationalism as well.

The main argument here is that at an identity level the past has been more political than the future – an argument frequently overlooked in the future-oriented transition literature. Quite a large consensus existed about the future, i.e. system change in general: therefore dealing with the past in Hungary has been more problematic.

We may argue that not only the leading communist party, HSWP, and its reformers engaged in politicking with history: since 1988, new parties also started to discover and rediscover their historical roots and rituals in order to dissociate from and identify with particular pasts in their argumentation. The political use of history did not end in 1990; critical studying of history and historical identity, thus, emerged at the turn of the decade. Defining 'we' and searching for historical roots for 'us' politicized history as well.

### 1 Change and the politics of memory

Particularly during transition periods the past belongs to the whole process of the change. The change itself consists of several alterations on separate levels – not all could be changed at the same time. Although the first free elections took place in 1990 and the whole parliamentary structure was soon completed, even as late as in 1999 a minister might still argue about “completing the system change”. Only in the summer of 2001 did the Prime Minister use the slogan that “the future has begun”.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, studies of mentality would suggest that changes in mentality occur slower than symbolic, economic or political alterations.<sup>3</sup> Not only is ‘the new’ born from ‘the old’, but at the same time ‘the old’ remains a part of ‘the new’. In politics the change has also to be fashioned from rhetorical constructions of identities and differences. History in the Parliament is a significant part of this process. We cannot get rid of the past, but more problematic is the question of what should be done with it.

However, history itself is a broad concept and encompasses many agents. Frank Füredi differentiates between *History* and *history*, the former also including the future-oriented broad narrative, while the latter refers to critical historical thinking.<sup>4</sup> The debate is not solely carried out amongst historians, but also occurs in public discussion and the media as part of ‘history culture’ (*Geschichtskultur*).<sup>5</sup> According to Wolfgang Hardtwig, this concept refers to undefined but various means of keeping the past in the present.\* We may also refer this phenomenon to the politics of memory (*Erinnerungspolitik*); hence maintaining and representing the past in the present needs political activity as well.

For these and other reasons I will use a concept which could be labelled ‘history politics’ (*Geschichtspolitik*) in this study. This con-

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\* “Geschichtskultur – das ist eine Sammelbezeichnung für höchst unterschiedliche, sich ergänzende oder überlagernde, jedenfalls direkt oder indirekt aufeinander bezogene Formen der Präsentation von Vergangenheit in einer Gegenwart. Sie ist nichts Statisches, sondern permanent im Wandel...”. Hardtwig, Wolfgang, *Geschichtskultur und Wissenschaft*. München, DTV 1990, 8-9.

cept deals with 'history as politics' (*Geschichte als Politikum*) and was first used by Edgar Wolfrum. According to Wolfrum, in 'history politics' the past is used to achieve mobilized, politicized or legitimised effects on the public (*Öffentlichkeit*).<sup>6</sup> These effects could be found, for example, in discussions surrounding identity, nation, rituals, memorial and festival days, etc. There the political use of history does not only refer to a certain 'misuse', but also arguments such as 'revealing the truth at last' which need political – though not necessarily party political – activity.

When we discuss the connection between the past and politics, it is evident that it is not only related to historians and politicians, but to all human beings. The struggle for supremacy and the duration of domination remain struggles over history.<sup>7</sup> Thus, on the one hand, the question in Hungary was about getting 'rid' of the past, but at the same time, and more important, it was about the political values of the new republic. Hence, we have come to history as an ongoing political debate of the past, and also to the judgement of that past, which always takes place in the present context. In Aristotelian rhetoric, a particular kind of forensic rhetoric deals with the past. There are two arts of forensic rhetoric: defending and accusing, which both also utilise arguments such as justice, injustice, honesty and disgrace. Aristotle was concerned particularly with courts, but parliaments are very typical examples as well.<sup>8</sup>

As a whole, this paper focuses on the first Hungarian Parliament and its discussions in the 1990s. During those years there were several debates concerning actual political issues and interpretations, in addition to which the Parliament was responsible for the creation of several laws which both directly and indirectly impacted on the ways of dealing with the past. Thirdly, the Members of Parliament, as well as the President of the Republic, maintained several commemorative rituals, such as laying wreaths, or representing the country through the practice of these public rituals.

## 2 The Hungarian Parliament 1990-1994

The Hungarian Parliament has been one of the most stable in East Central Europe: five out of the six parties elected in 1990 still held seats in the Parliament in 2001, and only one new party had emerged in the elections of 1998. In 1990 only 14 members out of 386 had been re-elected from the previous Parliament. However, conversely, there was also *a longer* continuity with the past: five MPs, mainly from the populist Smallholder's Party, FKGP, had already been MPs immediately after the Second World War.

A typical MP in 1990 was a man born in 1944, which was also the average age of members of the largest party, the centre-right Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF. In three of the parties the average age was higher, which here is connected to personal experience as well: in the Hungarian Socialist Party, MSZP (1938), in the Christian Democratic People's Party, KDNP (1935), and the Smallholders were the oldest (1932) on average. On the other hand, the Alliance of Free Democrats, SZDSZ typically represented the 'beat-generation' (1948). The League of Young Democrats, FIDESZ, had an age limit of 35 in their membership guidelines; therefore an ideal FIDESZ MP was born round 1962. Hence, from the four Visegrad countries Hungary was the only one without premature elections in the 1990s. At first the centre-right Government of József Antall (MDF) – led by Péter Boross from December 1993 – held its positions until the elections of 1994. At that time the socialist party, MSZP, won an absolute majority of the seats.

The educational level of the Parliament in 1990 was the highest it had ever been, since 90% of its members had university level degrees. There were 100 teachers, 77 lawyers, 47 economists, but only three workers, as was pointed out by the newspaper *Magyar Hírlap* on 2<sup>nd</sup> May. There was a significant group of humanists and, in particular, 27 historians. The new Government might even be called the 'Historian's Government'.

In the parliamentary calendar, *Szabadon választott* (The Freely Chosen), the new members were given a chance to introduce themselves in 1990. There, for example, political activity in 1956

was openly considered a merit, especially in the Smallholders' Party, in which almost a third (29,5%) had had something to do with the 1956 revolutionaries. Moreover, the tradition of 1956 had played a significant role in the life of the new President, the author Árpád Göncz, of SZDSZ. Furthermore, two ministers in the new Government, the new Prime Minister, the historian József Antall and the Minister of Defence, the historian Lajos Für, had been directly involved in the events of 1956. Directly involved was also the Prime Minister of 1994-1998, Gyula Horn (MSZP), who had been on the other side of the front at the end of 1956.

In 1990-1994 the Government identified itself more to the right and the Opposition more to the centre and to the left. However, one peculiar, but not insignificant, case was based already on distributing the seats in the Parliament. In 1990, the seats were distributed as in Britain – the Government on the right and the Opposition on the left side of the Parliament – however, in 1994, the winners did not want the right side. FIDESZ agreed to be “the farthest right” but criticized the fact that the decision was not made according to *historical* tradition, but rather on *ideological* grounds. Thus, a historical left-right axis was not evident: it had to be identified and maintained by the parties themselves.<sup>9</sup>

### **3 The Significance of the 1956 Revolution and Fight for Freedom**

The opening ceremony of the newly-elected Parliament took place on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1990. The moment was historic and the presence of the past obvious. The occasion was honoured by the presence of the 1945 Speaker of the Parliament, Béla Varga, and by Otto von Habsburg, a descendant of the last king of Hungary. In the first session, the new Parliament connected the present to the past and enacted a law which dealt with the symbolic meaning of 1956. In the first paragraph, its memory was enacted into law, and the second paragraph declared 23<sup>rd</sup> October a national holiday. The new speaker of the Parliament, György Szabad (MDF), an historian by profession, declared 1956 to be the most important connection to the historical past, and the most important basis for the creation of the future in Hungary.

This freely elected Parliament regards as its urgent task to codify the historical significance of the October Revolution of 1956 and its struggle for freedom. This illustrious chapter of modern Hungarian history can only be compared to the 1848-1849 Revolution and War of Independence. The Revolution of 1956 lay the foundation for the hope that it is possible to achieve a democratic social order, and that no sacrifice for our country's independence is made in vain. Although the ensuing suppression reinstated the old power structure, it could not eradicate the spirit of 1956 from people's minds.

The new Parliament assumes the responsibility to preserve the memory of the Revolution and the ensuing struggle for freedom.

The Parliament underscores its determination to do everything in its power to secure multiparty democracy, human rights, and national independence by proclaiming in its first session the following law:

- (1) The memory of the 1956 Revolution and its struggle for freedom is herewith codified.
- (2) October 23, the day of the outbreak of the Revolution of 1956 and the beginning of the fight for freedom, and also the day of the proclamation of the Hungarian Republic in 1989, shall henceforth be a national holiday.

We may argue that the first Hungarian Parliament began its work with studying the past and already "preserving the memory". The first paragraph concentrated on several matters: it codified an event into law and defined it as an historical event. The act, almost unique in a democracy, becomes more understandable from the point of view of 'history culture'. When we focus on the Hungarian penal code, we are able to locate several examples of such laws from the communist era and before. As mentioned in the text above, 1848-1849 was enacted into law on its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1948, although this is merely one example among many. Since 1848 several anniversaries and, in particular, the commemoration of certain deaths were codified in law. Besides Hungarian national heroes such as Deák, Széchenyi or Horthy, Francis Joseph (1916) and Josef Stalin (1953) were also designated for commemoration. The memory of Stalin was de-canonised, however, as late as 1989, by the reform communist Government as a part of the democratization process.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, in July 1990 the new Parliament requested that the Soviet Union condemn the intervention of 1956. The request was directed to the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union, and this was also a parliamentary document that dealt with history. According to the Parliament the...

... military intervention in 1956 was merely a contemptible act against the country's sovereignty and a serious crime against the Hungarian people... Parliament requests that, in a re-evaluation similar to that of the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Supreme Council of the Soviet Socialist Union should deem illegal and condemn the 1956 military intervention by the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

This step, according to the statement, would strengthen the Soviet Union's commitment to having respect for the sovereignty and independence of the Hungarian Republic, would contribute to the creation of amicable relations between their respective peoples, and would be a sign of encouragement to the Central and Eastern European people with regard to the hastening of the process towards the change to a democratic system.

Already, on the following day, Gennadi Gerassimov commented that the intervention was unpardonable and agreed with the request. The final answer was delayed until after the 1991 coup in the Soviet Union and took place in December, when Prime Minister Antall signed several bilateral treaties in Moscow and Kiev. During that visit, Mihail Gorbachev declared that thirty-five years earlier the Soviet Union had intervened in the domestic affairs of Hungary.<sup>12</sup>

On the first anniversary of the republic – and thus on the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising – the Parliament held an extraordinary session at which relatives of the 1956 martyrs and heroes of the revolution were present. On that occasion President Árpád Göncz and Prime Minister József Antall made speeches on the significance of 1956. Both pointed out historical analogies with 1848 and, in particular, Antall stressed the significance of 1956 as an essential part of Hungarian national mythology.



Finally, the name and memory of Imre Nagy, who had been executed in 1958, was prominent in several discussions. At the end of June 1990, the MPs discussed the possibility of withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact. At that time the Parliament renewed Nagy's declaration from 1956 in which he affirmed that Hungary had already left the Pact. Furthermore, in June, a general amnesty was also declared – symbolically the name of Imre Nagy was added in that law.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4 National Symbols, Holidays and Memorials**

The old kings's crown and its connection to politics has been a matter of debate many times in Hungarian history. In 1990, the Parliament eventually selected as the national emblem the coat of arms with a crown which had been used before 1946, i.e. also during the Horthy era. However, an alternative was suggested by the Opposition: to choose the so-called Kossuth emblem – the same emblem but without a crown – which, according to its supporters, was a more democratic political symbol.

In June of 1990, *Medián* published a poll conducted the previous November about the issue. According to the poll, 49% preferred "the crown", 34% the Kossuth emblem, and 15% the current coat of arms with a star. Among the younger citizens, more educated people, the residents of Budapest, protestants and atheists, the Kossuth emblem was more popular, while older people, catholics, less educated and people from the "countryside", i.e. outside Budapest, preferred "the crown".

In the Parliament, "the crown party" had a majority over "the Kossuth party", although in the first vote, held on June 19<sup>th</sup>, the crown did not receive the necessary constitutional majority of two thirds. Miklós Szabó, a historian and an MP of the Free Democrats, opposed the idea and contended that the crown alternative might be interpreted abroad as reflecting a yearning for the pre-45 period; on the other hand the Kossuth emblem would represent the democratic efforts of 1918, 1946 and 1956. However, the Government once again suggested "the crown" on July 3<sup>rd</sup>. The opponents made a counter-proposition that in certain sites and on certain oc-

casions the Kossuth emblem could be used, while “the crown” would be used on more solemn occasions. Prime Minister Antall, also a historian, replied that there are many republics which have a crown in their coats of arms. The crown alternative was eventually selected with the bare two thirds majority required by the constitution. The present coat of arms is designated in the constitution, as was its predecessor as well.<sup>14</sup>

The discussion about the national holidays of the new republic took place in March 1991. A total of three alternatives were suggested and the Parliament was forced to decide which of the three national holidays would be promoted to *state* holiday. In the debate, Government circles tended to support Saint Stephen’s Day, i.e. the memorial day of the first king, which was commemorated for the first time in 1989 since the 1940s. The supporters argued that this day best expressed the ideas of the Hungarian ‘state’ and ‘constitution’. Christian Democrats added that the day was also a Christian day. Representatives of free and young democrats preferred March 15<sup>th</sup> (the 1848 Revolution), based on the consideration that the day represented the unity and ideas of democracy.

In the final vote, the winner, August 20<sup>th</sup>, was backed more in the ranks of the Government and March 15<sup>th</sup> by the Opposition. Hence, on the basis of the vote, August 20<sup>th</sup> became the state holiday of Hungary (*állami ünnep*), but the two others also maintained a certain position: they were defined as national holidays (*nemzeti ünnep*). In the law, October 23<sup>rd</sup> was defined with two meanings as “the day of the beginning of the 1956 Revolution and the fight for freedom, and as the day on which the Hungarian Republic was declared in 1989”.<sup>15</sup>

Although a national holiday refers in other countries to a king or the royal family, in Hungary the most important day of the state refers to medieval history, and to the first king to whom the Hungarian Kingdom is connected. In addition to this, August 20<sup>th</sup> also had actual political significance in 1991, because it connected Hungary also to the conservative traditions which were used prior to 1945. This helped to strengthen prejudices of the Opposition regarding the basic ideals of the new republic.

Moreover, a few debates concerning memorials took place in the Parliament. These could be divided into three categories: 1) unveiled statues, 2) removed statues, and 3) memorials which were debated but not built. Initially, in the autumn of 1990, the Foreign Minister, a historian, Géza Jeszenszky (MDF), opposed the idea of re-establishing the statue of Trianon. The basic problem could be connected to nationalism and revisionism, in other words whether the statue – the four points of the compass, i.e. the four areas lost in the Treaty of Trianon – would give to rise to the old ideas of the Hungarian revisionist policy between World War I and II. The debate continued later in the 1990s as well, because the only Soviet liberation memorial left in Budapest since 1989 had been built precisely on the same spot.

Secondly, since 1991 The Reconciliation Statue Foundation (*Megbékélés Emlékmű Alapítvány*) had planned a memorial to the memory of both sides of combatants of 1956. The original idea was to build another memorial for the *martyrs*, which would be located beside the existing statue of the *victims* on Republic Square. In October of 1991, some art historians rejected the idea. With the signature of the leader of the Budapest Gallery, himself a Member of Parliament in the leading Government party MDF, they expressed their doubts about the existing consensus and the function of the memorial.

The plan of the joint-monument did not materialize, and the memorial which had been erected in 1960 was abolished in September 1992. In November, the memorial issue reached the Parliament floor, when the chairman of the radicalized 56-veteran organisation TIB, Tibor Zimányi (MDF), condemned the idea. According to Zimányi, nowhere in the world was it possible for the fallen of both sides to be included in the same memorial. The case of Spain was not an appropriate example for him, because the country had not fallen under foreign rule. Alajos Dornbach (SZDSZ) responded that a black and white division between killers and revolutionaries was impossible, because both sides had innocent victims and bystanders. Finally, more than 400 memorials were unveiled after 1989 to commemorate 1956.<sup>16</sup>

Outside the Parliament the anniversaries were used for political demonstrations as well. On the third anniversary of the new Republic, on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1992, an incident occurred when groups of neo-Nazis gathered on the Kossuth Square. When President Göncz tried to make his speech, they whistled and shouted at him. On 26<sup>th</sup>, the issue was discussed for three hours in Parliament, and it was debated whether the Government or the Opposition had been responsible, and especially why the police had not prevented the action of the skinheads. On the basis of this incident, several members of the MDF created an initiative to prohibit Fascist and Bolshevik symbols. Since then, the hammer and sickle, red star, SS-badge and swastika have also led to proceedings in court.

### **5 Justitia Plan and Reckoning with the Past**

The Czechoslovakian example of banning former communist functionaries in 1991 is the most well-known case in East Central Europe. However, although collective guilt was never accepted in Hungary, emotional elements were not lacking in the discussion. The debate polarized parties, and there were proposals which were not completely considered and prepared at all.

Already at the end of August 1990, a detailed *Justitia* plan was made public. In the space of eleven paragraphs, the plan put forth a broader settlement with the past, expressed a desire to identify responsible parties, and wanted to take legal measures against the leaders of the old system. Representatives of the MDF had given the plan to the Prime Minister in June, and it was made public in August, although the proper debate began only a year later.<sup>17</sup> The whole debate culminated in the word *igazságtétel*, 'making justice'. *Igazság* means both 'truth' and 'justice', and thus, two meanings were entangled in one word. The 'truth' from 1956 also meant 'justice' for 1956, and it became an issue in the hot-tempered political debate on how to deal with the past.

As an interlude in March 1991, the Attorney General, Kálmán Györgyi, answered one interpretation, which concerned volley fires (*sortüzek*), i.e. firing into a crowd of demonstrators, which had occurred in 1956. There was no possibility of punishing the perpe-

traitors as war criminals because Hungarian law from 1945 dealt only with the Second World War. However, he saw the opportunity to change a law on the conditions of international commitments so that crimes committed during the communist era would have no statute of limitations.

In the summer the *Justitia* plan once again became part of the political agenda of the MDF. It is essential to note that it dealt with quite an extensive political reckoning with the past. According to the plan, it was time, for example, to speed up the system change, as well as to revitalize and change the spirit of Hungarian radio and television. The plan was to be carried out regardless of whether or not it was supported by the majority.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of October, the Parliament discussed the issue of homicide, treason and disloyalty between 1944 and 1990. In one of the most intense debates of the new democracy the MP Ágnes G. Nagyné Maczó (MDF), for example, stated that until then the Government had failed in its responsibilities and that those people, "who have destroyed Hungarian culture", should be brought to justice. Another MP argued that this question was outside party interests, i.e. above parties. The third opinion concerned the future: guilty and not guilty should not be equal in the future. On the other hand, socialist MP Iván Vitányi stated that they would awaken a spirit of reprisal, and that moral judgement belongs to society, not to Parliament. The leader of the Young Democrats argued that this judgement must be based only on the law, and not on emotions.

Finally, the law was accepted in Parliament on November 4<sup>th</sup>, i.e. it was timed precisely for the anniversary of the second Soviet invasion in 1956. The proposal dealt with homicide and treason committed between December 1944 and May 1990. The Parliament accepted it by a vote of 197 for, 50 against and 74 abstaining. An open vote was requested, because the bill was not compatible with Hungary's international agreements. The vast majority of the Government parties voted for, and from the opposition FIDESZ and MSZP (one absent) voted against. The majority of SZDSZ were absent, four of them voting for and two against.

After the vote, President Árpád Göncz made the decision to turn to the Constitutional Court to clarify the content of the law. Another 1956 veteran and MP, Imre Mécs (SZDSZ), considered the bill harmful from every point, and threatened to refer it to the Constitutional Court. In addition, close relatives of the deceased made a statement that they did not accept the Government's proposal. They had created an alternative: instead of court proceedings the real criminals should be named in public, with the full extent of their actions made known. In November the Chairman of the Human Rights Committee in Hungary stated that the criminals of the dictatorship should be punished only within the framework of the rule of law. Moreover, an ex-56 veteran and MP, Miklós Vásárhelyi (SZDSZ), condemned the law, while another ex-veteran, János Dénes (ex-MDF), even demanded hangings.

Finally, the Constitutional Court made its decision in March 1992, finding all paragraphs of the law to be against the Constitution. They decided that the paragraphs were not clearly defined, and a law must already be enacted before a crime is committed. When President Göncz commented on the decision, he reminded everyone of two principles: every nation has the right to know its past, and legal responsibility does not mean that the state should not re-open events of the last decades, i.e. the question also deals with people's sense of justice. From the ranks of the Opposition it was argued that the rule of law had won, and that the democratic state structure was functioning. A representative of the governing party argued that in the European value structure and Judeo-Christian culture, crime and punishment could not be separated.<sup>19</sup>

In April, Attorney General Györgyi opposed the idea of a new bill, noting that retroactive punishment would be against the law. However, in September it was reported that the Government was preparing a new bill which was based on the bill VII/1945, concerning war crimes. The model was taken from present-day Czechoslovakia, in which legal proceedings were to be modelled on the basis of the law enacted in 1950. According to the newspaper, lawyers had advised Prime Minister Antall two years previously that it would be extremely difficult to get convictions. Both

the Hungarian Martial Court in Budapest, and the local Martial Court at Győr, had refused to prosecute in the case of volley fire which had taken place in Mosonmagyaróvár in 1956. They argued that prosecuting would mean the death of the rule of law, because in Hungarian law manslaughter has a statute of limitation of fifteen years, which had run out in 1971.

In the Parliament there were several proposals. A few MPs asked for an investigation of 1956 on the basis of war crimes. Because the law still existed, the Attorney General ordered the investigation. Politically, the debate took place in the Parliament around the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1956, when skinheads had whistled the President down and prevented his speech. The Government, however, did not unambiguously defend the President. On the contrary, the Minister of the Interior, Péter Boross, rather understood the situation by claiming that “perhaps a Socialist Hungarian Nuremberg is not a bad formulation”. Finally, socialists opposed the bill; Free Democrats and FIDESZ abstained from voting on the Government version.

In March of 1993, President Árpád Göncz, having been asked to, solicited the viewpoint of the Constitutional Court before he would sign the bill. The Court made its statement at the end of June, and again declared the bill unconstitutional. In October, it became apparent that the Geneva Convention of 1949, which protects the victims of war, defined international armed conflicts and forbade actions that were not international armed conflicts from being prosecuted. According to the Constitutional Court, the first paragraph of the bill was unconstitutional; however, the second was not.

Despite its complicated sentences, the message was clear: crimes committed in 1956 were not considered war crimes, but crimes against humanity. On October 22<sup>nd</sup> the President signed the bill.<sup>20</sup> Finally, constitutional solutions had won and strengthened the idea of rule of law in Hungary. However, the processes themselves have been as difficult to carry out as the law itself, and several cases were still open at the turn of the millennium.

## 6 Screening Law

Screening has become a pivotal tool in clarifying the past in several post-communist countries. In Hungary, the law “for controlling persons chosen to particular important positions” was enacted in March 1994, and it came into force on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1994. According to the law, the persons should be screened in order to enhance the democratic functioning of the state. After incriminating evidence has been established the person should either resign or his/her name was to be published. However, from the point of ‘history politics’, the law not only deals with official and secret members of the former counter-intelligence (III-III). It can cover more distant past as well, because it also concerns persons in the armed forces (i.e. people who collaborated with Soviet forces right after the uprising) as well as members of the Fascist Arrow Cross Party before 1945.

According to critics, the timing of the law prior to the May 1994 elections suggested that its motivation was to damage the Government’s major political rival, the Hungarian Socialist Party, which was leading in the polls. The discussion itself had already begun in the autumn of 1990, when the free democrats proposed their own version of the law. At that time their proposition was, however, rejected by the Government parties.<sup>21</sup>

In the next phase of the discussion, the Minister of the Interior, Péter Boross (MDF), referred to a forthcoming law and a commission, which should consist of the Prime Minister, President, Parliament Chairman and the Chairman of the Constitutional Court. This commission would investigate whether a person had been a member of the III-III, the armed forces between 1956 and 1957, the ÁVH, or whether there were aggravating circumstances in the cases before. The Minister speculated that the results would be secret, or would only be published after consultation with the person; in June, the III-III archives were declared state secrets.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, quite soon, it had become apparent that the question was not only about the former members of the old ruling MSZMP or counterintelligence, but it was a far deeper problem in which the past could also be used to compromise someone in the present.



Party membership, i.e. collective guilt did not become a criterion for processes or discrimination but, on the other hand, there were some ideas about ousting persons. The Minister of Justice, István Balsai (MDF), argued that the Government should further restrict those who had belonged to organisations like the ÁVH or workers' guard from public action. According to another allegation, any person who had participated in the reprisals could not lead the Committee of Foreign Affairs.

In February of 1993, the newest version of the bill – known also as the “little brother” of the retrospective *igazságtétel* – outlined several categories of co-operation: a secret informer, documents provided and signed by hand, an informer, and belonging to the armed forces between 1956 and 1957. On the basis of the draft, the law would touch a large number of people: Members of Parliament, those nominated for office, those who would take an oath, the Government, political secretaries, judges, lawyers, ambassadors and the President and Vice-President of the National Bank.

The discussion in Parliament finally began in October of 1993. The bill was referred to as a ‘fluoroscopy’ and also had the nickname *pufajkás* law, named after *pufajkás*, who was a man who had aided the Soviet army after November 4, 1956. According to the new law, the files of the security services would not be made available to the public until July 1<sup>st</sup> 2030, i.e. 30 years after the screening or lustration process (*átvilágítás*) would have ended. The Government parties voted for, whereas among the Free Democrats, only one supported the bill and the others abstained. Ten socialists voted against it, and the remaining two votes came from SZDSZ and independents.

Although the law ordered lustration, the issue has been controversial ever since. The Hungarian Parliament could not deal with the question as quickly as the Czechs did, and, compared to the proposition of the Free Democrats in 1990, aroused suspicions that also the Government had something to hide. Secondly, the law went far back into the past, and, thus, for example forgot economic commitments – in fact an adult of 1944 would be over 70 years old

when lustrated for the first time. In its broadest version the process itself is quite cumbersome to carry out.<sup>23</sup>

### **7 Hungary Between Two World Wars**

In the first Parliament not only was the state socialist past dealt with but, as our examples demonstrate, the whole of Hungarian history was in principle used as a political argument. During the post-1945 era Hungary between the World Wars had become a certain “anti-period”, but since 1990 many analogies to this era have also started to come to the fore. Already in September 1990 the largest Opposition party, SZDSZ was worried about the ideals of the new republic. The party took out page-long political advertisements in both *Magyar Hírlap* and *Népszabadság*, in which it evaluated the first hundred days of the Government. They argued that the Government was building less and less continuity with the years 1956 and 1947, rather it clung to the ‘great deadlock’ of Horthy’s Hungary.\*

Earlier in June, Prime Minister Antall had commemorated Trianon, and expressed concern about the fate of minorities in neighbouring countries. His words that he wished in his soul to be the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians became famous, because they also meant Hungarians living outside the present Hungarian state. At the time – on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary – the Speaker of the Parliament, György Szabó, had also asked Parliament to commemorate Trianon, and the faction of the Young Democrats, FIDESZ, left the room in protest. The Foreign Minister Géza Jeszensky, however, clearly torpedoed the idea to rebuild the old

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\* “Fears have risen about the undisguised nostalgia which the parties of the governing coalition feed in the direction of Hungary prior to 1945. The spirit of the coalition recalls [idéz] the Hungary between the two World Wars. The governing parties decreasingly admit the continuity with 1956 and 1945–47, and increasingly refer to our historical deadlock of Horthy’s Hungary. It alarms the people who do not want the system change to bring back the vanished world of upper classes [úri világ] and who want to move towards the democratic Europe of the turn of the millennium” *Magyar Hírlap & Népszabadság* 3 September 1990 (Transl. HN).

memorial statue of Trianon which had existed in Budapest between the wars.<sup>24</sup>

Until 1944 the country had been ruled by Admiral Miklós Horthy, who was then exiled to Salazar's Portugal, where he died in 1957. Little by little, the Horthy-question also began to actualize in post-communist Hungary. In February 1991, *Népszabadság* had posed the question "Horthy to be Buried in Hungarian Soil?" According to President Árpád Göncz, Horthy had the right to 'rest' in his motherland, but if he were to be buried officially, it would also be an acknowledgment of his policy. In October, the Minister of Justice István Balsai (MDF) denied juridical rehabilitation, but considered it obvious that political rehabilitation was only a matter of time. According to Balsai, it was unlikely that Horthy's tomb in Estoril would continue to be acceptable to Hungarian public opinion. The end result would be the same regardless of whether it was carried out by the Government or any other organ.

In November, socialists made an interpellation regarding whether the Government was planning to rehabilitate and rebury Admiral Horthy. The reburial had political precedents and expectations, because in Hungarian history there have been several reburials. These reburials, more or less, have had political consequences and have been used by different political forces. Imre Nagy's reburial in summer 1989 was one of the most important events of the year. According to the MSZP's interpretation, a democratic human being could not oppose Horthy's reburial, but there was speculation about the role of the state. When Prime Minister Antall answered the question, he stressed that because Horthy had not been sentenced, he would not be rehabilitated or reburied by the state either. Thus, at that time Antall rejected Horthy's reburial as a state event.<sup>25</sup>

However, it seemed at first that the reburial would be organised by the family in accordance with ecumenical ceremonies, as opposed to being organised by the state.<sup>26</sup> When Horthy was finally reburied in Kenderes in September 1993, the President and seven Government Ministers participated in the occasion. As in the case of Imre Nagy's reburial in 1989, the struggle over what

was private, official or public domain became actual. No particular sense of rhetoric was needed to define the prejudices of “repetition” or of “cyclical time”, particularly in the polarized political situation which characterised Hungary at that time. For example, the MP Tamás Bauer (SZDSZ) argued that if there were a private funeral, the state should not issue a medal, the national television would not broadcast it, and ministers should not reveal beforehand whether or not they are planning to attend. Finally, the day before the reburial, the liberal-minded intelligentsia held a symbolic demonstration, “The Final Goodbye to the Horthy System”, where they bade farewell to the Horthy era.<sup>27</sup>

According to foreign comments, the funeral itself became a political event. Critical comments were issued from Slovakia, France and from Bucharest. The Slovak Vice-Prime Minister, Roman Kováč, for example, noted that six ministers who attend a public function cease to be “private persons”. In the Government, the Horthy-criticism seemed to fall upon deaf ears. Antall, for example, had noted that they did not expect Western or international history writing to want to place Miklós Horthy in his correct place.<sup>28</sup>

Although Horthy’s reburial did not lead to the rehabilitation of his policy, certain and sometimes propagandist fears existed in the neighbouring countries. In a situation in which three neighbouring countries had split, analogies to the past, particularly to the 1930s were presented and specially in countries with Hungarian minorities. In 1938 and 1940 Horthy’s Hungary had received territories back with Hitler’s assistance. Thus, it was no wonder that Hungary’s role in the Second World War and its consequences were debated in the Parliament as well.

## **8 Compensation**

Compensation and privatisation became issues when history and historical past were discussed in the Parliament. In January 1991, local peasants occupied their former land, which began a wave of occupations lasting for several weeks. Swift compensation, already in “the air”, quickly became a current matter, and the first consti-

tutional version of the compensation law was accepted in June 1991.

In the discussion the Free Democrats first supported some more compensation for the general public, socialists supported only partial compensation and FIDESZ generally opposed the idea. The Government backed the idea of returning estates to their former owners and of recreating the *domestic* private ownership in the first place. Already before the general elections of 1990 the Smallholders' Party promised that it would restore private ownership, particularly in agriculture to the level of 1947, if the party participated in the Government.

The proposal restricted compensation to former owners who had lost their property after June 8<sup>th</sup> 1949. Hence, a certain limit was defined; however, at the same time it left earlier injustices without compensation. This politically unfortunate bill seemed to leave most Jews and their descendants out of the question and created speculations and expectations of anti-Semitism. For example, in Autumn 1990 newspapers debated whether the slogan *hordót a zsidónak* (let's give compensation to Jews as well) was anti-Semitic or not.

It is important to bear in mind that the year 1949 was ousted from the bill in the parliamentary debate. It was done by the Government party. At the same time, they accepted a principle that in the future a forthcoming law of compensation would be based on the limit of 1939. Later, in 1992, two other laws were enacted which broadened the temporal basis of compensation: now the limit was set between May 1<sup>st</sup> 1939 and June 1949, and between March 11<sup>st</sup> 1939 and October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1989. However, when we study political cleavages in the first Parliament, it is essential to know that in June 1991 the Parliament rejected the Opposition's proposal that would have extended the time-limit until 1939. Moreover, another law was accepted without a broad consensus in July 1991; the Parliament returned estates, building-sites and cemeteries, but neither land nor rented houses to churches.<sup>29</sup>

## 9 Conclusion

This paper studied how the Hungarian Parliament dealt with history between 1990 and 1994. History was not only debated as “history” with a small “h”, but also as “History” with a capital “H”, i.e. referring to identities. The past appeared even more political than the future: political identities and the new image of the ‘nation’ were constructed at the same time through the attempt to thoroughly research and document the problematic past. Not only were different concepts and views of history confronted, MPs also formed opinions on historical issues, and also the new Parliament has become a certain *lieux de mémoire* for national commemoration.

For several historians, the era was ‘historic’ and historians found a new political mission in defining political platforms for parties. Analogies from the past were used, and in connection with all three national holidays, political commemorations took place which gave space for political speeches as well. The first Prime Minister József Antall even defined his party and tried to keep its three wings together with historical terms.

However, it became apparent how difficult it was to found a new historical ‘basis’ for the future. At first, models and influences were taken from 1956, but little by little, other, and even inconvenient, images of the past emerged. These historical cleavages, and particularly the mistrust and expectations of “the other”, i.e. political opponents, moved and influenced people.

The most controversial discussion dealt, in its broadest sense, with retrospective *igazságtétel*. Although there were other difficult issues as well, this question might drastically have polarized the political atmosphere. Neither the Truth Commission nor the idea of collective guilt emerged; however, there were four ways of dealing with the past since 1988: *compensation, rehabilitation, naming* and *punishment*. Punishment was the severest of these and its commemorative influence was restrictive and juridical. Naming the perpetrators could also restrict, although in the Hungarian case of 1991 it was more liberal for the perpetrators, because instead of punishment moral judgement was preferred. The character of the retrospective proposal was evidently very political, in

that its purpose was to settle old injustices, and particularly to reach those who had participated in the political repression after November 4<sup>th</sup> 1956.

On the whole, the discussion of punishment evidently cleansed the atmosphere in the long run; however, it *also* essentially polarized and widened the gulf between the Government and the Opposition as well as between the Government's supporters and those who support the Opposition. In particular, polarization and radicalization came to the fore after the decision in the Constitutional Court in March 1992.

Although the debates were partly labour pains of the new democracy, they have the potential of revealing something more about the Hungarian political cultures and their commitments to the past as well. However, the Hungarian debate is not unique in the world after 1989. According to Welsh, "the weight of the past" is particularly significant in the "transitional countries".<sup>30</sup> Particularly in those societies dealing with the recent past, the political question is broader and more complicated than mere historical writing. There are also obvious consequences, such as whether the policy of reconciliation will work, and if so, how soon it might work.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Langewiesche, Dieter, "Geschichte als politisches Argument: Vergangenheitsbilder als Gegenwarts kritik und Zukunftprognose - die Reden der Deutschen Bundespräsidenten". *Saeculum* 43/1992, 42-45; Stråth, Bo, "Introduction. Myth, Memory and History in the Construction of Community". In *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community. Historical Patterns in Europe and Beyond*. Ed. Bo Stråth. Brussels, P.I.E. - Peter Lang 2000, 19.
- <sup>2</sup> *Népszabadság* 9 December 1999; 21 August 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Vovelle, Michel, *Ideologies and Mentalities*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1990; Le Goff, Jacques, "Mentaliteterna, en tvetydig historia." In *Att skriva historia. Nya infallsvinklar och object*. Stockholm, Norteds Tryckeri 1978.
- <sup>4</sup> Füredi, Frank, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future*. London, Pluto Press 1992.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Koselleck, Reinhart, "Geschichte". In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Herausgegeben von Otto Brunner & Werner Conze & Reinhart Koselleck. Band 2. Stuttgart, Ernst Klett 1975, 593-594; Carper, N. Gordon, *The Meaning of History. A Dictionary of Quotations*. New York & Connecticut & London, Westport 1991.
- <sup>6</sup> Wolfrum, Edgar, "Geschichte als Politikum – Geschichtspolitik. Internationale Forschungen zum 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert". *Neue Politische Literatur* 3/1996, 377.
- <sup>7</sup> Wolfrum 1996, 376; Langewiesche 1992; Habermas, Jürgen, "Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie. Das offizielle Selbstverständnis der Bundesrepublik bricht auf". *Die Zeit*, 7 November.1986.
- <sup>8</sup> Aristoteles, *Rhetorik*. München, Fink 1980, 1358b. Cf. also Collingwood, R.G., *The Idea of History*. Oxford, University Press 1963, 242; Nyysönen, Heino, *The Presence of the Past in Politics. '1956' after 1956 in Hungary*. Jyväskylä, SoPhi 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> Nyysönen 1999, 178-189; *Youth and History. A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents*. Vol A. Description. Eds. Magne Angvik & Bodo von Borries. Hamburg, Körber Stiftung 1997, 282; Szabadon választott. *Parlamenti almanach* 1990. Budapest, Idegenforgalmi Propaganda és Kiadó Vállalat 1990; *Népszabadság* 10 June 1994.
- <sup>10</sup> 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 22; *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953-1963*. Ed. György Litván. London & New York, Longman 1996, x; *Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye* 1990. 1 kötet. Közzéteszi az Igazságügyi Minisztérium és a Minisz-



tertanács Hivatala. Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó 1991; 1948. évi törvénycikkek. Jegyzetekkel ellátták Dr. Vincenti Gusztáv, Dr. Gál László. Franklin-társulat kiadása 1949; Nyssönen 1999; 1875-1876. évi törvénycikkek. Budapest, Franklin-társulat 1896; 1930. évi törvénycikkek. Budapest, Franklin-társulat 1931; Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye 1989. 1 kötet. Közzéteszi az Igazságügyi Minisztérium és a Minisztertanács Hivatala. Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó 1990.

Since 1994 the two other Hungarian Parliaments have also enacted memorial laws to commemorate particular historical events. First in 1994 the new socialist-liberal Government commemorated the Provisional Government which had gathered in Debrecen in 1944. The Prime Minister of the 1956 Revolution, Imre Nagy, was codified on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1996. The third debate took place in the Autumn of 1999, when the Government prepared for the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first king, Saint Stephen, who is considered as the founder of the Hungarian state. At that time Stephen's memory was codified in law and the crown was transferred from the National Museum to the Parliament.

<sup>11</sup> *Magyar Hírlap* 24 July 1990; Nyssönen 1999, 182-183.

<sup>12</sup> Magyarország Politikai Évkönyve [hereafter MPÉ 1991]. Eds. Sándor Kurtán, Péter Sándor, László Vass. Budapest, Ökonómia Alapítvány - Economix RT 1991, 476; *Magyar Hírlap* 25 July 1990; 7 December 1991.

<sup>13</sup> 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 312; cf. Antall, József, Model és valóság II. Budapest, Athenaeum 1994; *Magyar Hírlap* 13 June 1990; *Népszabadság* 27 June 1990.

<sup>14</sup> *Magyar Hírlap* 23 June 1990; 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 1215-1228.

<sup>15</sup> 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 6519-6537; Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye 1991. 1 kötet. Közzéteszi az Igazságügyi Minisztérium és a Miniszterelnöki Hivatal. Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó 1992; *Népszabadság* 6 March 1991.

<sup>16</sup> *Magyar Hírlap* 10 September 1990; Prohászka, László, Szoborsorsok. Budapest, Kornétás Kiadó 1994, 73-74; Boros, Géza, Emlékművek '56-nak. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet 1997, 150; 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 21059-21063.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MPÉ 1991, 277.

<sup>18</sup> 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 6580-6581. The whole plan was revealed by the newspaper *Népszava* on 5<sup>th</sup> September. The basic idea was that those who were responsible for the present situation should not be in a better position than those who had suffered as a result of the system. According to Imre Kónya (MDF), the idea belonged to the political philosophy of the party. Practically, the reckoning meant supporting the

initiative of a retrospective law, reduced pensions on the basis of activity in certain organisations having to do with the former ruling party MSZMP. Moreover, historians and lawyers should investigate the illegalities occurring after 1956, and the Chairman of the Academy of Sciences should provide information concerning these illegalities at the request of the Prime Minister. In Kónya's view, the change had been too risky to have been carried out earlier. *Népszava* 5 September 1991.

<sup>19</sup> 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 11132-11187; *Magyar Hírlap & Magyar Nemzet & Népszabadság* 5 November 1991; Magyarország politikai évkönyve 1992 [hereafter MPÉ 1992]. Eds. Sándor Kurtán, Péter Sándor, László Vass. Budapest, Demokrácia Kutatások Magyar Központja Alapítvány - Economix Rt 1992; *Népszabadság* 19 November 1991; 22 November 1991; *Magyar Hírlap & Népszabadság* 4 March 1992.

<sup>20</sup> *Magyar Nemzet* 29 April 1992; *Népszabadság* 22 September 1992; *Magyar Hírlap* 17 October 1992; Juhász, Gábor, "A megnevezéstől a háborús bűnösségig. Igazságtételi törvényhozás Magyarországon 1990. február - 1993. február." *Mozgó Világ* 4/1993, 38; *Népszabadság* 30 June 1993; 13 October 1993; *Törvények...* 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Törvények és rendeletek hivatalos gyűjteménye* 1994. 1 kötet. Közzéteszi az Igazságügyi Minisztérium és a Miniszterelnöki Hivatal. Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó 1995; *Népszabadság* 9 March 1994; Welsh, Helga, *Dealing with the Communist Past: Central and East European Experiences after 1990. Europe-Asia Studies* 48, 3/1996, 422; *Magyar Hírlap* 5 September 1990.

<sup>22</sup> The discussion began again in May 1991, when 12 Smallholder MPs had voluntarily asked for their own lustration to clarify their past. In the end of May it was the Prime Minister who gave their files to them, thus causing a debate of power political relations and if someone was ruling someone else's past, cf. MPÉ 1992, 432-433. At the time they speculated that there could be 50 spies in the Parliament, and wondered whether the publishing of the names could also be used for political purposes *Népszabadság* 11 May 1991; *Magyar Nemzet* 13 May 1991; 13 June 1991.

<sup>23</sup> *Népszabadság* 13 February 1993; 17 January 1994; 9 March 1994; Welsh 1996, 418. It was estimated that the law in its present form would apply to some 10,000 - 15,000 people. If they did not resign, their names would be published in official papers and given to the newsagency MTI. However, there were voices criticizing the possibilities of putting the law into practice, and the National Association of Judges remarked that the screening work had political dimensions, *Magyar Hírlap* MH 10 December 1994. During the socialist majority Parliament its scope was limited to

500-600 persons. At the same time they established a special institute, the Historical Office, *Történeti Hivatal*. This office was finally opened in September 1997. It offers the possibility for citizens to view their files. The Historical Office, however, does not contain all essential documents. This is due in part to the fact that the secret police destroyed some of the material in early 1990. In summer 2000/2001 the law was again prolonged for the next four years by the right-wing Government. They extended it to concern ca. 15 000 persons including media, 2500 judges and 1400 lawyers. A year earlier, the Constitutional Court made a decision, which kept the amount of screened persons unchanged. *Népszabadság* 23 June 2000; 13 July 2000; 28 July 2000; Nyssönen 1999, 279-280.

<sup>24</sup> *Magyar Nemzet & Népszabadság* 4 June 1990; 5 June 1990.

<sup>25</sup> *Népszabadság* 25 June 1991; 21 October 1991; 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 11641-11645.

<sup>26</sup> In April 1993, Horthy's widow promised to organise the event strictly as a family affair, which the Government supported. However, at the end of July, they planned a memorial medal for Horthy, *Magyar Hírlap* 31 July 1993, and it was announced that several members of the Government would participate in the ceremony as private citizens, *Népszabadság* 16 August 1993.

<sup>27</sup> *Népszabadság* 19 August 1992; *Magyar Hírlap* 6 September 1993; 4 September 1993.

<sup>28</sup> *Népszabadság* 9 September 1993; *Magyar Hírlap* 23 August 1993.

<sup>29</sup> 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 5719-5749; *Népszabadság* 13 October 1990; *Magyar Hírlap* 21 April 1993; 1990-94 Országgyűlési Értesítő, 8868-9101.

<sup>30</sup> Welsh 1996, 419.