

Violence Glorified or Denied? Collective Memory of the Red and White Terrors in Hungary, 1919–Present

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In the spring and summer of 1919, contemporaries were convinced that they had been witnessing history in the making. The famous liberal historian Henrik Marczali made what we today would call the first “oral history” interview with Béla Kun, the de facto leader of the Republic of Councils.¹ At the same time, but to a different end, the novelist Cécile Tormay was recording events as she saw them in her *An Outlaw's Diary*.² The battle over the sovereignty of interpretation (*Deutungshoheit*) of the recent past thus began even before the demise of the Republic of Councils at the end of July 1919. For the first several months after the collapse, its exiled leaders did not discuss the recent past; preoccupied by survival, the refugees, if they committed their thoughts to paper at all, focused their attention on the White Terror: on the paramilitary and mob violence and the political repression that followed the collapse.

The memory of the Republic of Councils, as it slowly took form in the winter of 1919, was thus colored from the start by (and it could be even argued that it was a reaction to) a later event, the White Terror. The exiled leaders of the Republic of Councils, such as József Pogány, saw the White Terror and the paramilitary groups as a tool in the hands of the feudal and capitalist elites to “exterminate the working class.”³ Non-communist refugees, such as the moderate socialist Oszkár Jászi, on the other hand, believed that the White Terror was the work of newly mobilized social groups, such as military officers, war veterans, enraged peasants, lower-ranking civil servants, and non-Jewish segments of the urban and petty bourgeoisie. In Jászi's view, the elite did not create, but merely sought to take advantage of, the murderous rage of these newly mobilized social groups in order to eliminate the agents of progress in Hungary, namely the progressive (mainly foreign, i.e. Jewish or German) intelligentsia. After they had done their duty, Jászi contended,

the more enlightened members of the political and social elite would push these radical groups into the background and restore the conservative liberal order.⁴

The Communist exiles turned the victims of the White Terror, particularly the executed leaders of the Republic of Councils, such as Ottó Korvin, into political martyrs.⁵ This new martyrology served several purposes. First, it was meant to justify Red crimes and divert attention from the mistakes and omissions made by the leaders of the Republic of Councils and from the violent aspects of Bolshevik rule. Second, the narrative about the White Terror was devised to undermine the reputation of Admiral Miklós Horthy and his National Army and cast doubt on the legitimacy of the slowly consolidating counterrevolutionary regime. Third, the colorful descriptions of the White Terror, the demonization of the enemy, and the hysteria about the counterrevolution and counterrevolutionaries helped to mend fences among the quarrelsome exiles. Whereas the debate over past policies, especially in regard to land reform and military strategy, tended to divide the exiles, the shared narrative about the White Terror helped to restore a semblance of unity.⁶

Only slowly were the exiled Communist leaders able to achieve a consensus on the memory of the Republic of Councils. The new agreement envisioned the recent past as a positive experience; it was a heroic, yet ultimately tragic, struggle on behalf of humanity to achieve emancipation and obtain social justice. The Republic of Councils thus came to be remembered in émigré circles as the first Hungarian government that extended political rights to the masses, and introduced sweeping social reforms. The Republic of Councils, the Marxist narrative went, moved working-class and poor peasant families into the confiscated castles and large apartments of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie; it opened museums and libraries to the working poor, who were hungry for culture, and sent proletarian children on holidays. In this narrative, the Red Terror played only a minor role. It is not that the exiled leaders of the Republic of Councils were apologetic about hostage-taking, confiscation of goods, mass executions, and other acts of violence. The radical refugees, as good students of Marx, considered violence “the midwife of history.” Machiavelli advised that the end always justified the means; for him, however, the end did not have to have a spiritual dimension. György Lukács and his comrades, on the other hand, considered Communism as mankind’s last home and final refuge. They did

not, however, just believe that any means could be used to reach this glorious end. Lukács and his companions were also convinced that the holy end sanctified the lowliest of means; it turned evil into good, and the readiness to use violence from a character fault into a sign of virtue.

How the Communists and the exiled moderate socialists remembered the Republic of Councils and the Red and White Terrors was of little concern to the large majority of Hungarians who never read their clandestine pamphlets and books. The incipient Horthy regime interpreted the recent past differently. The courts, which passed judgment on some of the captured Communist leaders in December 1919, declared the Republic of Councils a criminal enterprise and the party officials and civil servants, irrespective of their ranks, as villains. The demonization of the Republic of Councils left no room to acknowledge its positive achievements; progressive social legislation passed in this period and the initially successful attempt to defend the country from invading foreign armies remained a taboo in the interwar period. In the conservative and Right-radical narratives, the Republic of Councils stood outside the flow of Hungarian history; according to the official narrative, the Communist victory had no roots in pre-war social and political problems, economic backwardness, or the mistakes and omissions made by the political elites during the war.

The first memoirs and historical studies composed by conservative and Right-radical authors portrayed the two revolutions as the product of a Judeo-Bolshevik world conspiracy.⁷ They mirrored the political pamphlets written by exiled Communists in Vienna; both the Left and Right-radical authors tended to exaggerate the brutality of their opponents, and often published stories which were pure inventions.⁸ More restrained in this regard were the Horthy biographies, which first appeared on the market in the second half of the 1920s. Written by Right-radical authors, the first Horthy biographies celebrated the admiral as an anti-Bolshevik hero, who had single-handedly defeated the Communist threat, ended the Red Terror, and restored both law and order and the country's independence.⁹ The Horthy biographies of the 1930s and early 1940s, on the other hand, portrayed the Regent as a conservative statesman who hated both left- and right-wing radicalism equally.¹⁰ In this modified narrative, the Admiral not only defeated Bolshevism, but also, by first reining in and later dissolving the right-wing militias, helped to restore law and order. Both the older and newer Horthy biographies denied that the admiral had ordered or

witnessed any of the atrocities; the later works, however, claimed that Horthy was a major force behind the prosecution of crimes committed by the officers' detachments and the civic militias.

Simultaneously with the conservative turn in the Horthy cult, the members of right-wing militias began to publish their memoirs.¹¹ In their books, the ex-militiamen paid little attention to Horthy; instead of the political elite, the authors focused their attention on the rank and file of the paramilitary groups: on their struggle against Communists, Freemasons, and Jews; and, most importantly, on the militia uprisings in western Hungary in the summer and fall of 1921, which preserved Hungarian rule in part of the contested region. The new fascist and national socialist parties in the second half of the 1930s also traced their origins back to the militias' struggle against both Bolshevism and the remnants of the pre-war liberal order. In the early 1940s, perhaps the best known national socialist academic, János Makkai, hailed the militia members as middle-class revolutionaries and Europe's first fascists.¹²

The demonization of the democratic and the Communist experience and the denunciation of the Red Terror were not confined to written text: they also found expression in art, monuments, and public celebrations. Many war memorials made a reference to the Red Terror in the figure of a snake or dragon, which were commonly understood as the symbols of Bolshevism. During the yearly commemorations of the lost war, the speakers rarely neglected to condemn Bolshevik rule. In the interwar period, every village and town which had been victimized by the Red militias erected monuments to honor their dead. In Budapest, plaques marked the places of Red crimes. The statues of the leading intellectuals of the counterrevolution, such as Bishop Ottokár Prohászka and the early modern saint János Kapisztrán, served the same goal. Prohászka was a patron of the student militias, the main forces of paramilitary violence on university campuses, and one of the sponsors of the *numerus clausus* legislation. The main force behind the Kapisztrán cult was Army Bishop István Zadravec. A counterrevolutionary of the first hour, the army bishop was a close friend of the best known paramilitary leader, Deputy Colonel Baron Pál Prónay; he continued to defend the paramilitary groups, and justified extrajudicial executions, armed robberies, and violent attacks on Jews long after the main perpetrators, the members of the paramilitary groups and patriotic associations, had fallen out of favor with the political and social elites.

After the liberation of the country by Soviet troops from Nazi occupation and Arrow Cross terror in April 1945, one of the first actions

of the recently legalized Communist Party and its social democratic and peasant allies was to remove the statues and plaques, and change the names of the streets, which had reminded people of, and made references to, the Red Terror. The removal of these memorials was followed by the destruction of the monuments to leading political and cultural figures, such as Bishop Prohászka, who had been idealized by the interwar regime, and Prime Minister István Tisza, whose murder at the end of October 1918 had been remembered as a prelude to the revolutions, chaos, and Bolshevik rule. Some of the socialist victims of the White Terror were reburied in public ceremonies. The second half of the 1940s also witnessed the erection of public memorials that served to commemorate the sacrifices of the victims of the White Terror.¹³ By contrast, the prosecution of surviving members of White paramilitary groups for the atrocities committed proceeded at a snail's pace and was fraught with contradictions. The most infamous paramilitary leaders had either died before 1945, or had emigrated or went into hiding after the war. Legal documents, including many interwar testimonies, had been lost, and the court system was overburdened by more recent crimes. The new democratic regime between 1945 and 1948, and its Stalinist successor after 1948, were prepared to prosecute the murderers of socialist or Communist dignitaries or labor activists; they were, however, reluctant to provide justice to the victims of hate crimes: that is, middle-class Jews who had no socialist or Communist connections.

The official memory paradigm of the White Terror emerged during the trial of Iván Héjjas (in absentia) and his men in 1947 and 1948. In his verdict, the President of the Court drew, for the first time, a direct connection between the White Terror in 1919 and Hungary's alliance with the fascist powers in the late 1930s, its entry into the war on the side of its allies and its participation in the invasion of Soviet Union in 1941, the role of the political elite in the Holocaust, and the horrors of the Arrow Cross dictatorship in the final phase of the war. The judge's conclusion quickly congealed into a historical fact and received knowledge, which was then repeated countless times in textbooks and at public celebrations between 1948 and 1989.¹⁴ The rehabilitation of the Republic of Councils as a positive experience also began soon after the liberation; ironically, as my study of parliamentary speeches after 1945 has made clear, the main role in its rehabilitation, just as in the destruction of "uncomfortable" monuments, was played by Social Democrats rather than the Communist Party. The new (old) consensus was that the Republic of Councils represented a positive experience and served as a prelude to, and model for, the new state after

1948. Aware of the lingering negative memory of the Red Terror, Communist leaders, however, were reluctant to call the new regime a continuation of the Republic of Councils. Eager to establish their nationalist credentials, the evolving new political elite after 1945 invested heavily in the centennial celebration of the 1848 Revolution. The new narrative portrayed the Communist takeover in 1948 as the culmination and fulfillment of earlier struggles—particularly the Revolution of 1848—for national independence, political emancipation, and social justice.

The 1956 Revolution led to a drastic shift in the composition, meaning, and political importance of the collective memory of the Republic of Councils. The bloodshed that accompanied the Revolution gave the left-wing recollection of the White Terror immediacy and relevance that it had not possessed since the fall of 1919. The connection between the White Terror, on the one hand, and the Second World War and Holocaust, on the other, had already been made after 1947: a new charge, namely that the counterrevolution of 1919 paved the way for the “counterrevolution of 1956,” was added. This was not an idle accusation: to prove that charge, the political police were ordered to reexamine the files of known and convicted counterrevolutionaries. Although, on the whole, the search proved to be a waste of time, in a handful of cases, the police and the courts were indeed able to prove the existence of such links. The trial in 1957 of the most important catch, the minor militia leader Mihály Francia Kiss, who had been on the run since 1945, gave the court the chance to publicize the official line about the connection between the two events.¹⁵

Built to celebrate the forty- and the fifty-year anniversaries of the Republic of Councils, the large and intimidating statues of soldiers and male and female workers were meant to show strength on the side of the political elite and to send a message to the population about the futility of armed resistance. With the consolidation and growing popularity of the Kádár regime in the 1960s, however, this function gradually fell to the wayside. The Kádár regime, both in its totalitarian phase in the late 1950s and its authoritarian period after 1963, continued to regard the Red Terror as a positive event, and violence as a justified and necessary means to defend itself against the machinations of “counterrevolutionaries.” The statues erected and the street and public buildings named after enforcers, such as Ottó Korvin and Tibor Szamuely, testified in the 1960s both to the unbroken identification with the Marxist view on violence and to the continued paranoia about the counterrevolutionary

threat. The coverage of the Red and White terrors in high school and university textbooks also changed only slightly between 1956 and 1989. Yet, with the increasing popularity of the Kádár regime, the negative messages became supplemented by more positive narratives as well. The Kádár regime in the 1970s and 1980s remembered the Republic of Councils mainly for its military victories and its achievements in the social and cultural realms. The new narrative transformed the Republic of Councils into a forerunner of the socialist welfare state, and the Red Army from the vanguard of a world revolution into a defender of the nation.

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed not only the reinterpretation but also the increasing commoditization and trivialization of the history of the Republic of Councils and the Red and White terrors. In the heyday of commemoration in the late 1960s, hundreds of poems and theater plays were written and performed, music was composed, and dozens of documentaries and adventure films were made about these historical events. Films such as *Bors Máté* (Matthew Pepper) provided wholesome entertainment. However, as propaganda material they were a poor substitute for hard-core ideological training; in any case, films such as *Bors Máté* were ill-suited to convert young men and women into fanatical defenders of the socialist system. The commodification and trivialization of the collective memory of the Republic of Councils continued in the last fifteen years of the regime's existence.¹⁶ The statues erected to honor the memory of the leaders of the Republic of Councils, such as Béla Kun, and the victims of the White Terror, however, were of modest size; instead of emanating threats and extolling violence in the service of a good cause, the newer works conveyed a humanist message about the futility of armed conflicts. It is not that old reflexes had completely died, however. In November 1988, on the eve of the regime change, the recently deposed Prime Minister, Károly Grósz, warned about the coming of a new "White Terror," if the party faithful were foolish enough to surrender power and opt for the restoration of parliamentary democracy. In a sign of the changing times, even his fellow socialists ignored the warning. The left-wing collective memory of the Republic of Councils and the Red and White terrors had expired as a political and intellectual force even before the complete collapse of the authoritarian regime.

The last thirty years has witnessed a partial return to the collective memory and commemorative practices of the interwar Horthy

regime. In the early 1990s, politicians in Parliament and opinion-makers in the media competed with one another to denounce the Republic of Councils as a government based on the exercise of naked power alone. After 1990, March 21, the day of the Communist takeover in 1919, was no longer celebrated as a public holiday. Memorials erected to honor the victims of the White Terror, unless they stood in cemeteries, were torn down and destroyed or transported to Memorial Park, “the museum of forgotten statues,” on the outskirts of Budapest. The textbooks, surprisingly enough, changed only gradually: even in the late 1990s, one could find high school and university textbooks which, at least in regards to the White Terror and the positive achievement of the Republic of Councils, continued to repeat almost verbatim the socialist narrative.¹⁷

While reminders of the Republic of Councils and victims of the White Terror were removed from public spaces, conservative and right-wing groups put up plaques, restored old statues, and renamed streets to honor the victims of the Red Terror. Intellectuals commonly identified with the counterrevolution, such as Dezső Szabó and Cécile Tormay, acquired the status of political saints in the same circles: their books have been republished, dozens of streets have been named after them, and many plaques and statues have been erected in their honor.¹⁸ The revival of the Horthy cult in the early 1990s put the role of the admiral during the counterrevolution in a more positive light; the celebration of Horthy as a man who singlehandedly defeated Bolshevism went hand-in-hand with the trivialization of the White Terror and the partial rehabilitation of its perpetrators.¹⁹ In the last ten years, a “war of memorials” sought to indict not only the leaders of the Republic of Councils, such as Béla Kun, but also fellow travelers, such as Mihály Károlyi; moderate and patriotic socialists, such as Imre Nagy; and cultural icons, such as the Marxist philosopher György Lukács (whose monument in the XIII district is being replaced by a Saint Stephen statue). The war over the interpretation of key events in modern Hungarian history is not confined to intellectual discussions. With the rise of paramilitarism and military violence, particularly against the Roma minority, the last twenty years has turned the recent revival of the cult of right-wing paramilitary groups and their leaders into a political and indeed a law-and-order issue of the first order.²⁰ The right-wing shift in Hungarian politics has led not only to the reassessment of the role of conservative statesman such as István Tisza; it has also raised the specter of the complete revision of modern Hungarian history and collective memory along conservative

and Right-radical lines by purging them of any positive reference to liberal, democratic, and social democratic traditions. The intense struggle over *Deutungshoheit* in regard to the meaning and significance of Hungary's first experiment with Communism and of the Red and White terrors will continue to have an impact on collective identity.

NOTES

1. Ignác Romsics, *Clio bővületében. Magyar történetírás a 19-20. században—nemzetközi kitekintéssel* [Under the spell of Clio: Hungarian history writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—with an international perspective] (Budapest: Osiris, 2011), 260–84.
2. Cécile Tormay, *Bujdosó könyv. Feljegyzések 1918–1919-ből* [An outlaw's diary: Notes from 1918–19] (Budapest: Génius, 1938).
3. József Pogány, *A fehérterror Magyarországon* [White Terror in Hungary] (Vienna: Arbeiter-Buchhandlung, 1920); József Pogány, “A munkásosztály kiirtása” [The extermination of the working class], in Györgyi Markovits, *Magyar pokol: A magyarországi fehérterror betiltott és üldözött kiadványok tükrében* [Hungarian hell: Hungary's White Terror as reflected in banned and persecuted publications] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1964), 402–19. On Pogány see, Thomas Sakmayster, *A Communist Odyssey: The Life of József Pogány* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012).
4. Oscar Jászi, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary* (London: P. S. King & Son, 1924).
5. Jenő Hamburger, “Mártirok” [Martyrs], in Markovits, *Magyar pokol*, 207–09; József Halmi, “Orgovány,” in Markovits, *Magyar pokol*, 64–77.
6. Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
7. See Peter Csunderlik, *A “Vörös Farsangtól” A “Vörös Tatarjárásig”—A Tanácsköztársaság A Horthy-Korszak Pamflet-És Visszeemlékezés Irodalmában* [From “Red carnival” to “Red Tatar raid”: The Republic of Councils in the pamphlet and memoir literature of the early Horthy era] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2019), 99–141, 232–62. See also Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Hunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2018).
8. Ladislaus Bizony, *133 Tage Ungarischer Bolschewismus. Die Herrschaft Béla Kuns und Tibor Szamuelys. Die Blutigen Ereignisse in Ungarn* [133

- days of Hungarian Bolshevism: The rule of Béla Kun and Tibor Szamuely: The bloody events in Hungary] (Leipzig and Vienna: Waldheim-Eberle, 1920).
9. Jenő Pilch, *Horthy Miklós* [Miklós Horthy] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1928).
 10. On Horthy biographies in the interwar period, see David Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz* [The Horthy cult] (Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Emlékek, 2015).
 11. Dr. Jenő Héjjas, *A nyugatmagyarországi felkelés: kecskemétiak az 1921. évi nyugat-magyarországi harcokban* [The uprising in western Hungary: Kecskemétiak in the 1921 battles in western Hungary] (Budapest: Magyar Ház, 2006; first published 1935[?]); Gyula Somogyváry, *És mégis élünk* [And yet we live] (Budapest: Auktor, 2004; first published 1943).
 12. János Makkai, *A háború utáni Magyarország* [Hungary after the war] (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1937).
 13. László Prohászka, *Szoborhistoriák* [Statue Stories] (Budapest: Városháza, 2004).
 14. Budapest City Archive (Budapest Főváros Levéltára or BFL), 13672/5 Nü Bp Nü 1946, Héjjas és társai Bp Nb. VII5e 20630/49.
 15. Supreme Court of the Hungarian Republic (Magyar Köztársaság Legfelsőbb Bírósága), Verdict (Végzés). Budapest, November 28, 1994, Budapest City Archive, XXV. 4.a. 1798/57 FB Bttö, Fr. Kiss Mihály, 74–83; István Rév, “Covering History,” in *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History and the Crisis of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael S. Roth and Charles Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 231–51.
 16. Péter Apor, *Elképzelt Köztársaság: a Magyar Tanácsköztársaság Utóélete, 1945-1989* [Imagined republic: The afterlife of the Hungarian Council Republic] (Budapest: MTA Történettudomány Intézet, 2014).
 17. See Béla Bodó, “Memory Practices: The Red and White Terrors in Hungary as Remembered after 1990.” *East Central Europe* 44, no. 2–3 (2017), 186–215.
 18. For a highly favourable account of the life of Tormay, see Krisztina Kollarits, *Egy bujdosó írónő, Tormay Cécile* [An outlaw female writer: Cécile Tormay] (Vasszilvány: Magyar Nyugat Könyvkiadó, 2010). For a more critical approach to post-1918 right-wing feminism, see Judith Szapor, *Hungarian Women’s Activism in the Wake of the First World War: From Rights to Revanche* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
 19. For the recent literature on the White Terror, see Emily Gioielli, “White Misrule: Terror and Political Violence during Hungary’s Long World War I” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2015); Gergely Bödök, “Vörös- és Fehérterror Magyarországon (1919–1921)” [Red and White

- Terror in Hungary, 1919–21] (PhD diss., Károly Eszterházy University, 2018); Béla Bodó, *The White Terror: Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919-1921* (London: Routledge, 2019).
20. On the changing political climate in Hungary in the last ten years, see György Csepeli, ed., *Új tekintélyelvűség a mai Magyarországon* [New authoritarianism in today's Hungary] (Budapest: Apeiron, 2011); for a positive portrayal of the members of the right-wing militias as patriots, see József Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa. 1918-1921* [The fate of western Hungary, 1918–21] (Vasszilvány: Magyar Nyugat, 2008); Pál Földi, *Rongyos Gárda* [The Ragged Guard] (Budapest: Anno, 2010).