

Hungary 1919: A Commune at the heart of Europe¹

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For conservatives, particularly apologists, old and new, of Hórhthy's counter-revolutionary dictatorship, the 133 days of the Hungarian Commune of 1919 was "*a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*", to use Macbeth's words.² But also, for the skeptics on the left, both before and especially after the dramatic changes in 1989/91, the Hungarian Revolution of the workers' and soldiers' Councils could not even be called a revolution...

At the opposite pole, against both apologists and skeptics, Lenin, on March 23, 1919, in his closing address to the 8th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, without hiding his worries and warnings for the difficulties confronting the newborn Hungarian Soviet Republic, considered its emergence as a "*historical necessity*" and, even, saluted it as "*a moral victory*" over the bourgeoisie.³

Why was it "a historical necessity", and not an accident of history? And, why continue to consider it "a moral victory", although a crushing defeat followed after 133 days? To answer properly these questions can reveal their *actuality* even today.

1 Paper presented to the International Conference for the 100th Anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, organized by the *Eszmélet* journal in Budapest on March 22-23, 2019.

2 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5.

3 V. I. Lenin. *Collected Works*, Vol 29, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, p. 234.

Necessity

Historical necessity does not mean a predetermined course of events but a historically determined field of objective contradictions making inescapable a living struggle of living forces, not the outcome.

The historical roots of the 21st March Hungarian Commune have to be traced deeply in the past, to the results of the defeat of the 1848 Revolutions in Europe. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy could survive and sustain its fragile equilibrium insofar capitalist development in Europe and internationally could sustain in its framework conflicting forces and contradictory tendencies all over the Continent. As a result of the 1848 defeats, unification and industrialization of Germany were achieved under Bismarck “from above”, by an “iron fist”. The growth of rising Prussian militarism, subsequently, found a vast reserve of soldiers in the subservient, decayed Empire of the Hapsburgs, ruled by an authoritarian police state established long ago by Metternich. The Hungarian nobility survived within a powerless ghost “monarchy”, by making a servile compromise with the Austrian aristocracy in 1867.

This entity, sarcastically called by Robert Musil, in his masterpiece *A Man without properties*, *KaKanie*, was described by Trotsky as “*simply a conglomerate resulting from dynastic needs, where all nationalities were centrifugal fragments*”.⁴ Ernst Bloch, in an article of his pacifist youth, in September 1918, on the eve of the Revolution in Germany, Austria and Hungary, rightly wrote that “*the Danubian monarchy was the sediment of the concept of the impossibility itself, the living equation of five unknowns in the sphere of politics*”.⁵ Both Trotsky, writing in *Borba* in 1914, at the beginning of the World War I, and Bloch nearly at its end in 1918, despite the political gap between them, agreed that “*the only road for progress not only for [Central and] the Southern Eastern Europe [...] but for Germany itself passes through the ruins, the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy*”.⁶

In his recent great film *Sunset*, the Hungarian director Laszlo Nemes has masterfully showed the contradictions and the unrest boiling behind the surface of a *Belle Epoque*, on the eve of the First World War: the contempt of imperial Vienna towards vassal Budapest, the servility of Hungarian capitalists towards the ruling aristocracy and their brutality towards Hungarian workers and the Roma minority, proletarian rebellions, the decay of a dying social order.

The conditions that permitted to this embodiment of “the concept of state impossibility” to survive were transformed into their opposite with the dramatic world-historical changes at the beginning of the 20th century. The post-1848 period of the apogee of capitalism was ended as well as the transition to the latest imperialist stage of world capitalism, into our epoch of capitalist decline. The equilibrium of conflicting forces in Europe and internationally, which until then sustained anachronisms such as the Danubian Monarchy, was broken. The explosion of the international contradictions led to the First World War, the defeat of the Central Powers and above all to “*the breaking of the international imperialist chain in its weakest link*”, in Russia in October 1917. Thus, the fate of the *KaKanie* was sealed and Revolution in 1918 gave a necessary end to this state impossibility.

But the contradictions were not defused, with the end of the Monarchy and the factitious “independence” of Hungary immediately challenged by the victorious

imperialist Great Powers of the Entente. From the opposite side, the dynamic of the international revolutionary process tended to acquire its *permanent* character, precisely what was tragically not achieved in 1848 but emerged victorious in 1917, in the October Socialist Revolution.

Lenin rightly had said that in 1917 it was not only the national weakest link that had broken but the *international* chain itself. The international dynamic of the revolution arises from this historic break in continuity. The drive towards its permanence comes from the *uncompleted* demands of the world historic process colliding with a declining global capitalism.

Hungary after November 1918 was at the crossroads of the unresolved international contradictions. From the one side, its newly formal independence was brutally threatened by the dismemberment imposed by the victorious imperialists of the Entente, particularly by the infamous Vix ultimatum threatening Budapest with military occupation. From the other side, the country, above all its workers' movement, was at the center of the post-1917 international revolutionary effervescence in the region, in Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The Hungarian bourgeoisie was paralyzed, totally unable to confront the threat of a new war in a country already devastated by the war. It abdicated literally from any responsibility and political power. The coalition between bourgeois democrats and social democrats disintegrated. Social democracy was split. Its majority left wing turned to the Communist Party, newly founded abroad, for aid, bringing finally Béla Kun and his imprisoned comrades from prison to power. The Hungarian Soviet Republic was born.

Béla Kun, in his speech at the public meeting of the Budapest Workers' and Soldiers' Soviet on April 19, 1919, rightly said:

Two world currents clash in battle over the Hungarian Soviet Republic: imperialist capitalism and Bolshevik socialism [...] This is a matter of the international class struggle [...] When we founded the dictatorship of the proletariat in Hungary, we did not base our calculations on our ability to tackle the Entente troops with our military strength in organized warfare. We did not believe that we could stop the offensive which is threatening us from all sides with those six divisions which the armistice agreements have permitted the Soviet Republic. We have emphasized and still emphasize that we based the fate of the Hungarian Soviet Republic on the international revolution of the proletariat.⁷

The *only possible opposition* to the Vix ultimatum and a total national catastrophe could be given by the forces of the international social revolution and by Soviet power. Thus, it was a *historical necessity*. A bold, possibly desperate but necessary leap beyond bourgeois democracy on the road towards world Socialism.

The abdication of the Hungarian bourgeoisie, at the moment of truth, in front of imperialism, demonstrated the impossibility of any independent role that it could ever play in history. It showed the fake "patriotism" and hypocrisy of all bourgeois

⁷ See Tibor Hajdu, *The Hungarian Soviet Republic*, Akadémia Kiadó, Budapest 1979, p. 24.

nationalists, especially in Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans, who always fight against socialist revolution and Socialism in the name of the “fatherland” and “to avoid a national catastrophe”. As a matter of fact, they succeed only to bring both social and national disasters.

In this sense we can understand that the Hungarian Soviet Republic also represented *a moral victory* over the bourgeoisie. It took over the responsibility and power from the historical and moral failure of the abdicating capitalist class.

The abdication of the bourgeoisie in conditions of extreme crisis reflected, in general, the historical limits, the exhaustion and decline of the capitalist class and of its system internationally. The imperialists and their local dependent national elites understood that their survival depended on the defeat of a world revolutionary trend, what they used to call “*International Bolshevism*” or “*an international Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy*”. From the other side, the demise even of the radical democratic wing of the bourgeoisie represented the transition to a higher form of polity. As Lenin said: “*the Hungarian Revolution owing to its having been born in a totally different way from ours will reveal to the whole world that which was concealed in Russia- i. e., that Bolshevism is bound up with a new proletarian, workers’ democracy...*”⁸

From this standpoint, the Hungarian Soviet Republic was a necessary manifestation of the nature of our transitional epoch.

Centrality

The Hungarian Revolution of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils should not be considered a secondary event in the periphery of Europe, following the Great War and the Russian Revolution. It is not an exaggeration to state that, at a certain moment of the postwar revolutionary turmoil in Europe, within the entire international context, the Hungarian Commune occupied a *central* position.

It was a Commune *at the heart of Europe*, not solely in a geographic sense but politically. For 133 dramatic days, it was situated at the heart of the continental conflict between revolution and counter-revolution, between international Bolshevism and imperialist capitalism.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic was an integral part of the Central-Eastern European Revolution organically connected with the land of the October Revolution, at that time still desperately struggling against the counter-revolutionary onslaught of fourteen imperialist armies and the White Terror gangs of Koltchak and Denikin. Soviet Hungary represented the highest and most crucial point of the regional revolutionary upheaval linking the Russian with the German Revolution.

In January 1919, the tragic month of the betrayal of the German socialist revolution by the SPD led by Ebert and Scheidemann, the time of the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by the Freikorps proto-Nazis under the orders of the social democrat Noske, two months before the March 21st Hungarian Revolution, Béla Kun wrote in a secret message to Lenin: “*We are fully aware that our fate is decided*

8 V. I. Lenin, op.cit.

in Germany, but despite that, we will do everything possible.”⁹

The fate of the European Revolution had not yet been sealed in 1919. Its future was still open. Despite the defeat and the brutal repression of the communist Spartacists in Germany, the revolutionary potential of the workers’ movement in that country, the most industrialized and advanced in Continental Europe, was not yet exhausted—until a series of crushing defeats in 1921-23. For a short but crucial period, for 133 days, the Hungarian Commune at the heart of Europe was the necessary bridge, the vital mediation between the revolutionary maelstrom coming from the east, Soviet Russia, to the metropolitan centers of Western Europe.

It is not an accident that even later, after the defeat, in 1926, the *Call of the Comintern*, the revolutionary song composed by Hanns Eisler with lyrics by Franz Jahnke, focused the attention of the international proletariat to four major cities with the greatest importance, at that time, for the European and world revolution: *London, Paris, Budapest and Berlin...*

The imperialists of the victorious imperialist Great Powers of the Entente were quite early conscious of the danger of a Commune at the heart of Europe. They rushed to blow up the Hungarian bridge between the Russian and German Octobers.

The Entente Supreme Command “*hurried to close off the Northeastern Carpathian fronts on both sides with secure military cordons, thus to prevent the ‘bacteria of Bolshevism’ from infiltrating Europe through Hungary*”.¹⁰ Lenin, at the leadership of the Bolsheviks, in the opposite camp, urged the Red Army in Ukraine to establish the connection with the Hungarian Soviet Republic and open the railway line linking Budapest with Kiev.

Imperialism was assisted by the rise of the non-Hungarian reactionary nationalism in the region. On its side was mobilized, “*the Hungarian Red Army’s most dangerous enemy: the army of the Romanian Boyars*”.¹¹ The nationalist ambitions of the weak local bourgeois classes rising to power were cultivated and manipulated by the Entente to be used as counter-revolutionary forces.

The new national bourgeois states that emerged from the disintegration of the old Empires in Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans were rapidly becoming vassal and buffer states at the service of competing Great Powers. Real national independence from imperialism and its interventions in the region, from now on, was and is possible only through an anti-imperialist struggle, in a radical clash with local bourgeois interests—in other words, by taking a revolutionary socialist and internationalist road.

More concretely, because of the multi-ethnic composition of Central and South Eastern Europe, the conflict between national and social emancipation and local reactionary chauvinism at the service of imperialism, in conditions of crisis and collision between revolution and counterrevolution revives also the perennial demands for democratic and socialist Federations of the Danube and the Balkans, with full respect of the national rights of all nationalities.

In this spirit after the March 21st Revolution, the revolutionary political forces

⁹ Tibor Hajdu, op. cit. pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ op.cit., p. 28.

¹¹ Idem.

were re-organized on a federation basis. 15 national sections joined in an International Socialist Federation, whose members included German, Bulgarian, French, Italian, Magyars of Eastern Transylvania, Ukrainian, Carpathian and Jewish sections, and the Eastern Socialist Party, which comprised of Muslims (Albanians, Turks and Arabs). The Hungarian Soviet Republic developed policies of protection of the non-Hungarian nationalities, based on the principle of the right to self-determination.¹²

Proletarian internationalism based on the prospect of world socialist revolution remained its central strategic guiding principle.

But the Hungarian Commune had to face not only military isolation, aggression and invasion by foreign imperialist and pro-imperialist troops or the hostility of regional bourgeois nationalism. It had to confront major problems within the working class movement itself: the hostility or inactivity of traditional reformist and centrist leaderships of the workers' movement in neighboring Austria under the right-wing social democrat Renner, and of course in Germany; but also its own subjective weaknesses, immaturity, and errors of leadership.

It is well known and documented that Lenin and Trotsky sharply criticized Béla Kun's leadership, despite their recognition of his dedication to the revolutionary cause. They criticized his revolutionary phrase-mongering, his constant vacillation between impressionist over-enthusiasm and passive adaptation to the reformists, between opportunism and adventurism, what Tamás Krausz aptly described as expectation for a "bureaucratic redemption".¹³

These negative features were not just personal limitations of an individual leader but manifestations of a more general subjective weakness within the vanguard of the working class: a deficit of theoretical, political and organizational preparation for the huge, entirely new and unexpected challenges of history, in conditions of an extreme crisis rapidly evolving into its denouement. The turn to the proletarian revolution started in March 21st, 1919, with even the demarcation line between a radicalized social democracy and revolutionary communism blurred, as both parties of the Left, the "old" social democratic and the newly founded Hungarian Communist Party merged into one single Party.

The maturity of the consciousness of the proletariat is a very important but a relative factor. In such conditions the responsibility of leadership becomes immense. "*Victory is a strategic task*", as Trotsky said.¹⁴ And the deficit of strategy in the leadership of the Hungarian Revolution was manifested particularly in the treatment of the agrarian question. Nationalization of the land was not followed by its division among the poor peasants. This policy alienated the Hungarian peasantry from workers' power, while the bourgeoisie in neighboring countries started land reforms to secure political support among peasants to their nationalist orientation in accommodation with foreign imperialist interests. Counter-revolution found a political basis in the rural

12 Op. cit., p. 421.

13 Tamás Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin: An Intellectual Biography*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015, p. 308.

14 Leon Trotsky, "The Class, the Party, and the Leadership", in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, Pathfinder Press, 1973, p. 360.

areas within an isolated Hungarian Soviet Republic surrounded and invaded by enemy military forces. Finally, it was not mainly internal counterrevolution but primarily foreign military invasion that gave to the heroic Hungarian Commune the *coup-de-grace*, followed by the barbarism of white terror and the long brutal dictatorship under Admiral Miklós Hórhly.

The centrality not solely of the eruption of the Hungarian Revolution but of its defeat as well cannot be underestimated. It was a huge blow not only against the Hungarian proletariat but against the European Revolution as a whole, a blow to the future of international Socialism. It contributed to the isolation of the Russian October Revolution, and finally to the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalinism.

Actuality: the future within the past

Victory or defeat neither depends on a mechanistic determinism nor can they be reduced to a list of subjective errors. In history, including in the case of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, developments are not linear. A complex living, dialectic interplay of objective and subjective factors, embedded in a determinate historical situation, leads to an outcome both necessary and open.

The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 has to be studied as *a strategic experience*, in the sense that Trotsky uses this term in *The Lessons of October*. It includes vital lessons of the interactions between the international and the national, between Central-Eastern and Western Europe, between politics and economy, between classes and political tendencies, parties and leaderships.

It outlines the dynamics of major deep trends of the epoch opened by the First World War and the October Revolution in the early 20th century, still working a hundred years later, in the 21st century, in new complex ways, in new situations, regionally, and on a European and world scale.

The Hungarian Commune at the heart of Europe was a crucial moment of an uncompleted international revolutionary process. The current global capitalist crisis, more than a decade long and still unresolved, demonstrates that this unfinished process, still today, drives to acquire its permanent character to provide a socialist exit out of a historical impasse that threatens humankind.

Even in its 133 days of life, the Hungarian Commune showed in practice essential elements of such a socialist exit: constant and consistent social policies for equality and justice; for wages, jobs, pensions, shelter; a free healthcare system for all, managed collectively by doctors and hospital workers' committees; a free, high-quality education for all, open to the most modern trends. Psychoanalysts like Sándor FÉrenczi, Mélania Klein, or Géza Roheim, later to become famous internationally, and who previously, under the pre-revolutionary regime, were forbidden to teach or exercise, now were involved in and supported by the revolution. Theater, cinema, music flourished with great artists, like Béla Bartók, who became later, exiled abroad by the counter-revolution, the pride of all human civilization.

Culture and revolution, the Modern in Art and the Modern in History, met in a synthesis, even temporarily, even if for only 133 days, anticipating a future of universal

human emancipation, considered so far only as an inaccessible Utopia.

Just one month before the tragic end of the Hungarian Commune, on July 1, 1919, the futurist Kassák, addressing the Congress of Young Communist Workers, said defying the coming barbarism: “*We stand in the midst of life as in the sweep of swift waters, with a large red star on our foreheads...*”¹⁵

And today, *the Commune*, not Horthyism, *stands still in the midst of life* of all oppressed as anticipation of the future to come, existing as a germ within the unfulfilled past.

¹⁵ Tibor Hajdu, op. cit. p. 77.