

The Hungarian Soviet Republic from a century-long perspective

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The politics of memory and the falsification of history

In Hungary today the memory of the Hungarian Soviet Republic has been systematically and consistently dishonored in the past thirty years. The once “glorious 133 days of the Soviet Republic” has been reinterpreted as the “red tyranny of a grim memory”, which serves as the starting point of the new politics of memory.

The revolutionaries of 1919 became scapegoats, whose statues and memorials have been removed or destroyed, regardless of whether we speak of the “red count”, Mihály Károlyi, the famous communist, Marxist philosopher György Lukács or the Hungarian Red Army, which fought for the national cause. Horthy, who was responsible for the white terror as the leader of the counter-revolution from August of 1919, appears today as the embodiment of the national interest, which is also shown by the fact that the statue of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the 1956 uprising has been replaced with a memorial of the “red terror’s victims” in 1934.

The legitimating ideology of the new, oligarchic capitalist regime silences and denounces the essence of the council (soviet) republic. It remains untold that in 1918-19, under the circumstances of the decline and collapse of the old regime, wide masses of the people became independent political actors. They created

their own organizations, the councils, and they became capable of dismantling the several century old structures of the old world of feudalism and the order of the privileged, the world, which measured the value of people exclusively against the possessed property, the passion for (more) wealth. In 1918-19 the lower social classes, the “unknown” workers and peasants became the forgers of history, who defended both their class interests and the national cause during the battles in Upper Hungary (contemporary Slovakia) or against the Romanian army supported by the Allied forces. The Hungarian revolutionary development inspired great thinkers and artists such as the worldwide famous Marxist philosopher, György Lukács or Lajos Kassák, who was a great figure of the revolutionary art. The contemporary successors of the Horthy-cult of the interwar era “naturally” ignore also this tradition when they describe the short history of the Council Republic as the barbarous rampage of the masses driven by the misery and destruction experienced during the First World War, who were deluded by the “Bolshevik illusions” and the “Communist demagogy”. The intellectual-cultural apparatuses of the new ruling classes are only driven by the ideologies of fierce (class) hatred. The purpose is the same: to deny any positive legacy from the short-lived Council Republic, which points beyond the capitalist organization of labor, and which could set a positive example to a democratic, progressive left and mass movement today.

The fall of the Council Republic at the beginning of August 1919 gave rise to a counter-revolutionary era, which referred to the nation, but in reality, it represented only the gentle classes and part of the middle class – precisely the strata, who bore responsibility for the First World War and the Trianon Treaty, which was catastrophic for Hungary. The old ruling classes could only re-establish their leading position thanks to the support of the Allied powers and the Romanian armed forces.

The experiences of the Council Republic

“The earth shall rise on new foundations, We have been nought, we shall be all” – this mood was the best expression of the thinking and feelings of the revolutionaries, the exultant masses, and this fundamental striving set out the direction of their actions. While it is true that these feelings were not prevailing in the whole Hungarian society, this mood affected the industrial working class, and it captivated the best of the Hungarian intellectuals and the representatives of the Hungarian culture, who in a certain historical moment became the real spokesmen of the workers and the peasantry, who came to represent the nation. We have to explore all contradictions of the 133 days of the dictatorship of the proletariat in order to establish conclusions, from which we can learn even today.

In the light of the historical experiences the capitalist order can only be destroyed through mass movements and the action of millions. Capital is only

scared of the socialist mass movements. The Hungarian history also gives evidence to this observation.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic was established on 21 March 1919, as part of the European and global revolutionary upswing, which followed from the bloody imperialist world war and the dissolution of the Habsburg, the Russian and the Ottoman Empires, which documented the partial collapse of capitalism. It is not accidental that there were many connections between the Russian proletarian revolution of 1917 and the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but what interests us here is the difference. In the general postwar revolutionary situation – as Lenin observed but the political leaders of the Allied forces also understood this in their own way — Hungary’s specificity lay in the fact that the “Russian virus”, the “virus” of a socialist revolution, the “ghost of Communism” was manifest in Eastern Europe and also globally. A symbolic act in this direction was the establishment of the Communist International, the global Communist party in Moscow at the beginning of 1919.

On the other hand, however, the first international martyrs of the cause showed the limitations of the revolutionary wave and its narrow horizon. The brutal murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, for which the social democrats were also tragically responsible, was the “forerunner” of the white terror in Hungary under Horthy and the rise of Nazism.

The triumph of the Hungarian Soviet Republic triggered a euphoria in many places also outside of Hungary. Lenin contemplated that thanks to the more “civilized” nature of the Hungarian development as compared to Russia, the revolution will trigger less violence in Hungary, and the Hungarians would reach the same Soviet power through a more human way. Albeit Lenin thought that the Hungarian example would be decisive precisely because of this civilizational advantage,¹ in reality, this “more civilization” failed to impact on the revolutionary development. The external conditions were also not very favourable since the Allied powers and the internal counter-revolutionary forces sought to destroy the new regime since the first day of its establishment.

The internationalist tradition

In another famous document (*Greetings to the Hungarian workers*) Lenin also considered it as a very positive development that in the case of Hungary – contrary to Russia – the various socialist formations were “immediately” united (he referred to the union of the Communist and Social Democratic Parties). Later, in July 1920, at the Second Congress of the Comintern Lenin examined the experiences and lessons of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and its fall, and

¹ Lenin Magyarországról. Kossuth, 1965. Előadói beszéd a Moszkvai Szovjet ülésén 1919. április 3. 87-88.

he analysed the relationship of the Hungarian economic and political measures from the perspective of the so called “alliance policy”. Lenin referred to the book of Jenő Varga, who emigrated from Hungary and became the commissar of the Soviet council of people’s economy, and he stressed the significance of the division of the great estates (*latifundium*) because without the distribution of land nothing changed in the Hungarian villages, “the day-labourers noticed nothing and the small peasantry did not receive anything”.² The alliance with the peasantry was easier in the history of the Russian revolution: in 1917 the peasants simply took the land. However, the connection between the national question and the social question was decisive in the whole region, from Budapest to Moscow as an all-national, all-regional and all-European problem. The counter-revolution everywhere organized restoration under the banner of nationalism.

In the aforementioned document Lenin spoke of the intertwining and contradiction of the national and social questions. He assumed that if nationalism and socialism (meaning: the endeavours to solve the social problems) are intertwined during the fundamentally progressive national wars, which followed the dissolution of the empires, the chances of the triumph of the revolution will be multiplied. This triggered a severe contradiction in Russia because the newly established Soviet power had to defend itself precisely from “patriotism” and sacrifice almost whole of the Ukraine in order to stop the German military advance, while the Hungarian Soviet Republic was engaged in a patriotic war in Upper Hungary and along the river of Tisza. However, this national self-defence did not violate the interests of other peoples, the propagated internationalism.³ It is a different type of contradiction but it also refers to the complicated development of the internal conditions of the Hungarian Soviet Republic: while it was a very progressive step to radically divide the state from the church, the restrictions on the practicing of the religion were counter-productive and had negative effects.

It was not only the history of the Russian revolution that showed that the prewar regimes had no real liberal democratic alternatives. The victory and defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic well reflected this development. The empires, which fought against each other in the First World War, could not adapt to the existing international system thanks to their outdated social-political structures. As Lenin observed, “Junius R. (Rosa Luxemburg – T. K.) rightly evaluates Austria because she considers not only its economic characteristics but also its political specificities, stating that Austria is internally inviable and that the Habsburg Monarchy is not the political organization of a bourgeois state but a

2 Ibid. 133-134.

3 Krausz Tamás: Lenin és a Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság. In: 1919 – A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság és a kelet-európai forradalmak. Bp., ELTE Kelet-Európa Története Tanszék-L’Harmattan, 2019., Kelet-Európa-Tanulmányok 5. (Szerk.: Krausz T. Vértés J.) 35-45.o.

loose syndicate of some cliques, who parasite on society and that the dissolution of Austria-Hungary is historically only the continuation of the disintegration of Turkey and also a consequence of historical development. The situation is not much better in many Balkan states and Russia. And if the great powers would exhaust their resources in this war, or the revolution would triumph in Russia, national wars, further, victorious national wars would be a real possibility.”⁴ Thus, the national wars of colonies, semi-colonies and dependent countries can be linked with the revolutionary social democratic working-class movement, the revolutions of the **center**. This fundamental assumption of Lenin followed from the theoretical framework that the global development of capitalism worldwide creates a demand for liberal democracy while it demonstrates that the capitalist system cannot satisfy this demand since it cannot even sustain democracy globally in a legal sense since liberal democracy – in spite of its historical embeddedness in the core countries – **in reality** becomes a power technical instrument of the maintenance of the hierarchical relations of the existing world order. Thus, according to Lenin’s argument, in order to liberate itself, the working class should make an alliance with the resistance movements of the “more backward” countries, which refuse to adopt a pre-capitalist orientation.⁵

The Hungarian Soviet Republic was a very “modern” phenomenon also in this field, it saw itself as part of the “socialist world revolution” in the spirit of the international cooperation of the peoples. The realistic alternative to this socialist development was, however, a capitalism, which was burdened with feudal elements and structures and outdated social and economic privileges. The real significance of this retreat became clear when after the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic the old gentle world was restored, which eventually led Hungary to the Second World War – as an ally of Nazi Germany.

The achievements of the Council Republic

What was the essence and legacy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, what were the main goals of the postwar, left-wing, revolutionary movements? The demand for social justice, collective ownership, free education and health care, the abolition of class oppression and exploitation – these were the most important “catchwords” of the councils. It is also worth mentioning some of the concrete social measures – eight-hour workday, the reduction of flat rents, the moving of proletarian families to the large bourgeois flats, the increase of wages by 10-80%, the expansion of social security, the defence of children and trainees and the declaration of female emancipation. The Hungarian Soviet Republic also abolished all forms of the oppression of minorities, it recognized the rights of

4 Junius brosúrjáról. 1916. július Lenin ÖM 30. köt. Bp., Kossuth, 1971. 28.o.

5 Krausz, id.

ethnic minorities, it banned prostitution, it established the first sanatorium for lung diseases, it introduced free entrance to Margitsziget, and the list can be long continued.

It is therefore our duty to preserve and continue the positive, humanist legacy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which was the first Hungarian experiment of a socialist revolution and a social self-governance. Marx said at one place after the defeat of the Paris Commune that the socialist experiments of the working class would fail many times, thanks to the resistance of capital and bureaucracy but if they are capable of learning from their successes and mistakes, they will achieve more results with less sacrifices.

The cause of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Lenin and Trotsky, Bela Kun and Tibor Szamuely, György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci has not failed, no matter what the bourgeois ideological apparatuses say. What really failed was the first great experiment of socialism since it had deformed and become state socialism; and the upper layers of bureaucracy had betrayed the cause. But we can clearly understand it, comrades, that is why we return to the initial stages because we want to learn from them. The social revolution as Marx meant it, dear comrades, friends, is not behind us, it is in front of us!

The Hungarian Soviet republic in March 1919 can as well be considered as an initial stage of this great cause.