

Remembering 1956: Some Reflections on the Historical Consciousness of a New Generation

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In any discussion of the issues of historical consciousness — specifically the impact of historical knowledge upon the thought patterns, emotional and spiritual dimensions of human events, indeed the very life and future of a given generation at a certain moment in human history — there comes to mind a whole series of observations and maxims about the impact of historical knowledge upon life. This is especially the case for that modern man who lives in one of the most historically conscious eras of human history and whose thought-processes have become permeated with the historical dimension of our human existence. Furthermore, human beings today are not always properly aware about what informs or ought to inform their consciousness about past and present and the relationships involved.

Before turning to the specific context — namely the historical consciousness of a new generation on Hungary and, indeed, among Hungarians beyond the Hungarian frontiers — one must at the very least spend a few moments and deal with the more general dimensions of the concern, which are as significant as the details about the thought and attitudes of one generation at a particular confluence of the historical process, only because we inevitably know more about the particulars and have generally failed to attend to those general and mostly philosophical issues which make possible even the meaningful discussion of the particular. Thus, historical consciousness, to be a positive and productive phenomenon must be based upon pertinent and proper historical knowledge and by proper is meant (for our purposes) the most nearly accurate, truthful, and comprehensive account achievable, not necessarily only in its details, but more in terms of the verisimilitude of the over-all presentation. In terms, after all, of the quality of historical

knowledge, achievable comprehensiveness in details is a responsibility of the historian; verisimilitude — as well as the ability to perceive connections among events, ideas, and attitudes — belong to the level of virtue and excellence in historical scholarship.

That great wit and also great historian (indeed a significant advocate of the philosophy of history) Voltaire quipped that history was written by the winners; if we were to accept all the implications of this pithy observation, it would be best to stop at this point and accept the fact that the history of the 1956 revolution in Hungary has already been written by the winners, or by those who have joined in some way the winning side. Some of their books have even been published in English language editions to make their version better known beyond the borders of Hungary. I am, of course, making a specific reference to the book of János Berezcs as his work was obviously intended to present (to use Voltaire's dictum once again) the version of those who have emerged victorious.¹ In connection with this, however, it should be stressed that one of the things most historians know only too well is how ephemeral the notion of winners and losers really is, even if one remains on the rather simplistic level of unexamined judgment. As historians it is obviously our fundamental obligation to search for and present the attainable truth in a truthful context. Hence, we must not accept the winner's version, although we disregard it at our peril, because the official accounts of winners sometimes harden into — sad to say — accepted historical "sources" and interpretations with the devastating consequences not only for the attainable historical truth, but also for the destiny of a people and the resultant false and thus damaging historical consciousness of many individuals, indeed sometimes of a generation or more. This concept of historical consciousness, specifically the notion of false consciousness, is not exactly unknown to Marxists and plays a role in the shaping of the proper understanding of history central to their system. The constantly revised versions of the so-called *Short Course* history of the Communist party produced in Stalin's time, or for that matter the constantly revised encyclopedias according to the dictates of the interests of the ruling elements, are some examples of the damage which can be done by the constant shifting of facts and interpretations.² However, let us instead turn to some examples of this from both the earlier and later eras of Hungarian history. The examples are intended to illustrate the pervasive and sometimes perverse power of historical consciousness as it is taught or communicated to a people. This is one reason why historians should be more concerned with the uses to which their scholarship is sometimes put

and thus concern themselves more with the teaching of history in the schools and the implicit — sometimes even explicit — views and conceptions of history in literary works, films, and cultural products generally. Winners, that is official historians — and certainly ideologues in power — did not and do not neglect these matters and are aware of their significance in shaping the historical consciousness of peoples.

Numerous contemporary Hungarian writers are well aware of the role of literature in contributing to the development of a better informed and more sophisticated and nuanced historical consciousness.³

Permit me to cite in this connection from a recent and highly acclaimed novel by Erzsébet Galgóczi: “Do you know, my dear, what great force has that truth which has been documented and committed to writing?”⁴ Galgóczi also cites Maxim Gorky in this connection, namely the role of historical knowledge in shaping historical consciousness, to wit: “Gorky writes somewhere that only that has occurred, the history of which has been written. This is true. Peoples will sooner or later forget about which they are constrained to be silent, about which even the written word remains silent. But what occurs when the account of an event is falsified...? Will that event always be perceived that way by future generations?”⁵ The applicability of this to our present concerns should be rather obvious and the implications hopeful. Many Hungarian writers and intellectuals still remember the events of 1956 differently than the official account.⁶

However, let us turn to examples from other eras. These may be instructive, but as is the case with all examples, are by no means totally similar. The kings of the Árpád dynasty, and even later rulers of the Hungarian kingdom, had their official chroniclers — and after the Renaissance era we sometimes characterize them as court historians — portray their deeds and ancestors in such a way as to obviously promote the image, that is foster a sense of both past and present, so as to justify the then current situation and power status of the king and the nobility. Among others, the *Chronicle* of Anonymous is but a case in point. Future historians using this chronicle, even with the best of intentions and the most sophisticated critical methods, are nonetheless dealing with “official” history, as is the historian who uses, with even the utmost discretion and good will, the first accounts of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 published by the information office of the Council of Ministers,⁷ or for that matter some of the ideologically motivated writings of journalists, participants, indeed even historians, published in Hungary during

the past thirty years.⁸ The differences between the two eras are, of course, accentuated by the greater ideological commitments of our own times.

If, in point of fact, there were not other accounts — here disregarding opposing ideologically motivated writings, sometimes masquerading as history or chronicle — the virtual monopoly of information, no matter whether a consequence of a mostly unlettered population, as in the thirteenth century, or a population whose historical consciousness has been limited by the cultural, educational, or media policies of a regime which has made a conscious effort to control information (the degree of success or failure is but a marginal issue in the context) is more or less similar in its effects. That is why one must go beyond or transcend official histories — or historical accounts written by winners — and turn to the accounts of those who have suffered the events, have lived to write about them, and can produce that memoir literature and those historical studies which, while also suffering from the immediacy to the events, can nonetheless provide a perspective no amount of retrospective historical writing, even outstanding critical writing, can provide. That is why the accounts and writings of those who were ostensibly losers are so necessary for any historical account pretending to completeness and comprehensiveness. Just to conclude this point, it might be added that such retrospective completeness (always limited by our human condition) was not really possible before the advent of an obvious and appreciated interest in history as a mode of thought which began emerging in the seventeenth century, and in spite of the protestations of some historians to the contrary, has been growing apace since that time, making an interest in the historical an obvious and permeating influence on our cultural condition.⁹ Can one really appreciate the extent to which illusions and ideals are fostered by the historical imagination today?

One could cite another example from the early history of the Hungarian people which has had an extremely negative impact upon their historical consciousness, namely the search for ancestors and relatives amongst peoples who cannot be demonstrated to have had any conceivable — not to mention significant — contact with the Hungarians during the early phases of their history.¹⁰ I mention this issue not in order to discuss it, but to point out that the propensity of many throughout our history to base their awareness of and appreciation for the past upon legends and obvious, but emotionally satisfying, misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the past, should serve to caution us against similar attitudes toward the history of more recent times. There can also be no doubt that

attitudes of despair engendered by a seemingly hopeless world situation can lead to serious difficulties on the level of historical consciousness and understanding.

The emergence of a more independent (and thus not official) historical profession has somewhat attenuated the preponderance of so-called winner's history, but by no means completely so and not to the same extent in different societies and nations. Furthermore, the appearance of socio-political systems informed by an obvious and stated commitment to a certain and certain-directional explanation of the nature and course of historical developments (such as the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of history officially dominant in Hungary today) have served to reintroduce perhaps in a somewhat different, but also more effective manner than in times past, problems and issues associated with official historiography; however, one must have a nuanced view of these matters, but not one so nuanced as to disregard (perhaps misunderstand) the issue of the relation of historical scholarship and politics. There is, after all, a large and impressive body of writing on this very significant issue of concern not only to historians, but to all who are concerned, or should be, with the impact of political considerations on our historical consciousness.¹¹

To expand and deepen our understanding of the historical consciousness related problems of the 1956 revolution, it is useful to examine some of the issues pertinent to the revolutions of 1848 and its consequences.

After the defeat of that revolution many of its leaders were either exiled, executed, imprisoned, or went into hiding. Efforts were made, and not for the first time, to write the history of such events and causes from the point of view of the winners, in this case the Habsburgs and their supporters. Their version of Hungarian history was taught in the schools and was also reflected in much of historical and other writings, as well as in numerous manifestations of cultural and political life. However, there were widespread opposition movements, especially in the intellectual realm, and some of Hungary's outstanding historians wrote their accounts of the revolution and the subsequent war for independence while in exile. Their works were available in their homeland only clandestinely and mostly under assumed names; the most important of these writings were those of Mihály Horváth.¹² It was these works, among numerous others, written and first published during the years of Horváth's exile, which ultimately prevented serious dislocations in the historical consciousness of many Hungarians during the era 1849-1867 and even beyond. Knowledge about the revolution

was maintained in spite of official displeasure and efforts to inculcate another version of the events. Indeed, those official histories and the textbooks based upon them have been mercifully forgotten.

One should also point out — as it was pointed out to this writer by a Hungarian dissident in 1984 — that after the execution of the thirteen military leaders of the revolution and the war for independence at Arad (a fact well known to even otherwise poorly informed individuals) the bodies were turned over to their families for proper burial. A comment by Christopher Dawson in his book, *The Gods of Revolution* may be instructive as we continue: “Only a dying civilization neglects its dead” (p. xvii). They were certainly not treated as shamefully as the victims of either the Rákosi years in Hungary, those executed with Imre Nagy, nor for that matter the many young revolutionaries buried in unmarked graves in the now famous section 301¹³ or in a special plot at the Kerepesi cemetery in central Budapest, the only location where participants in the 1956 revolution were buried in large numbers and contiguously. It was only through the actions of some yet unnamed individuals that the plan of the authorities to raze these graves has, to the best of my knowledge, not been carried out.¹⁴ Quite simply, the lack of knowledge about these gravesites (and what they represent in terms of the contemporary history of Hungary) and the almost absolute insistence of the authorities that this not become public knowledge has had and continues to have, in my estimation, a very negative impact on Hungarian society generally. More specifically, it reacts negatively in terms of perspectives for the destiny of the country and its peoples and casts a long shadow over any meaningful historical outlook. It is the source of historical and psychological wounds. There are very obvious socio-psychological impacts and consequences of this wounded historical consciousness and these can be meaningfully illustrated by quoting a passage from the concluding pages of Boris Pasternak’s novel *Dr. Zhivago*:

Microscopic forms of cardiac hemorrhages have become very frequent in recent years. They are not always fatal. Some people get over them. It’s a typical modern disease. I think its causes are of a moral order. The great majority of us are required to live a life of constant, systematic duplicity. Your health is bound to be affected if, day after day, you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune. Our nervous system isn’t just a fiction, it’s part of our physical body, and our soul exists in space and is inside

us, like the teeth in our mouth. It can't be forever violated with impunity.¹⁵

Extending upon this description of a situation in which the events of the past as experienced are not permitted to exercise their expected (if left unhampered) impact upon the historical consciousness of an individual to the socio-political context and the study and practice of history as an activity with a public dimension (historians write for their desk drawers even less than literary figures do), it should be expected that the imposition of a false sense of history would also have similar negative social effects.

This is certainly the case when one reflects — it is not really proper to say examine in this context because all one can do is reflect upon shared personal experiences and draw inferences from what one hears and reads — upon the fundamentally warped, if not partially schizophrenic, historical and social consciousness in Hungary today. Furthermore, many social indicators used to characterize the situation of Hungarians today, such as high suicide rates, alcoholism, inter-generational conflict, excessive and obvious materialism, loss of perspective, cynicism, while instructive, do not call direct attention to what was described by Pasternak in the passage cited above.

In my estimation — based to a great extent upon some focused conversations with Hungarian scholars concerned about the future of Hungary and the historical consciousness of the populace, conducted both in Hungary and here during the past three years — one can point out that the high incidence of suicide and stress-related health problems exact a heavy toll from precisely that category of individuals (the middle-aged intellectually and spiritually sensitive element) most concerned with the future of their nation.¹⁶ The inability or the unwillingness for whatever reason, to freely examine all — and not just those officially allowed or tolerated — past events, individuals, and ideas, are enervating the collective nervous system of the most valuable members of an entire generation. It certainly is not a healthy situation. This, however, is the context in which one must examine the impact of the 1956 revolution upon Hungarian historical consciousness during the past decades.

In the study of the events of the Hungarian revolution — after an initial campaign to discredit it in any possible manner until approximately 1962 — it has, until quite recently, been generally glossed over and neglected, simply forgotten about. At the present time, after it became obvious that the younger generation was very interested,¹⁷ and the elder generation — including but by no means

limited to the dissident community — had not forgotten the essence, even if it sometimes remembered poorly or only subjectively the particulars of those events, the regime moved from relative silence to misinformation — indeed disinformation — mostly tendentious presentations of the events or purported events in great detail to overwhelm by excessive particulars and carefully chosen facts to make points supportive of the regime and the Soviet Union. This is exemplified quite evidently in the book by János Berecz; he introduces his discussion of the events between October 23 and November 4, 1956 thus: “It is equally important that these conclusions [drawn from the discussions of the events] should be passed on to the coming generations of a constantly renewing society, in order to help them avoid errors and avert new tragedies. This is at least as important as the need to recognize the new demands of new periods.”¹⁸ Having stated the purpose of his book in avowedly political terms and noting further that interest in these events (calling it a counter-revolution) is not declining, he does his best to explain its history in terms of the interests of the regime.

Not intending to analyze in detail the attitudes and methodology of the Berecz volume, at least two examples can be cited to indicate some of the shortcomings. First of all, in what purports to be a scholarly work, sources are cited very selectively and often key statements are left without documentation whereas relatively minor points are overdocumented. The goals of the revolution, expressed perhaps most compellingly in the list of demands generally known as the fourteen points, are never cited in full, only four of the fourteen being mentioned.¹⁹ The unrestrained use of ideological jargon is also most disturbing in what was meant to be a scholarly work.

Berecz attacks any number of times the so-called “class enemies” who in his estimation are still not reconciled to what he characterizes as thirty years of progress in Hungary. This progress is undoubtedly real and cannot be denied or dismissed, but it is limited to realms other than the basic demands and concerns of the 1956 revolution. Nor does Berecz neglect the *émigrés*, realizing that many of the writings and sources concerning the revolution have been written or published by individuals who left the country at different times after the defeat of the revolution. He in effect dismisses their efforts in the following words:

The *émigré* reactionaries who lament their wrecked hopes, continue to pursue a blindly incorrigible approach, deploring the passing of the ultimate opportunity for a take-over in Hungary.

Some who played an important role in those days are overwhelmed by nostalgia and nurse fresh hopes. They are certain to suffer new disappointments, for they have broken away from Hungarian reality and the actual power relations.²⁰

While it is true that there may be a danger that those who recall their participation in great events or upheavals may distort the events or perhaps view them too subjectively; it is, however, also true that this danger is easier to rectify by subsequent historical criticism than the conscious elimination of sources and obvious distortion. Ideological jargon is also made meaningless by the passage of time and thought. Nonetheless, there is no substitute for immediacy and closeness to the events, but that by itself represents only the material indispensable for the study of history, not the historical work by any means.

There can be no doubt that those who chose to emigrate at the time of a great national tragedy (there is a significant tradition for this step in the turmoil typical of the history of East Central Europe and the significance and subsequent role of the *émigré* was explained poignantly by Comenius, exemplified by Rákóczi and Kossuth among many others) bear a special responsibility to preserve their memories and the documents illustrative of their actions and times. While their activities are not the only component of the future historical account of those events, they remain nonetheless a unique part of it.²¹

There are, of course, a number of other equally significant components, including the residue of such experiences as are passed on through the forms and conventions of the culture itself, as well as the sources and documents zealously guarded by those in power. Only all of these elements together can eventually contribute — in the hands of a good historian — to the acceptable telling and the necessary retelling of the account of the revolution, as well as its cause and consequences.

However, the possibility of doing this well is strongly influenced by the continuity and character of the historical consciousness of a people over the course of many generations. It has been one of the recurring negative elements in the formation of the historical consciousness of the Hungarian people that very often one generation could not pass on directly its experiences and struggles to the next. The desire to do so was certainly there, but the interests of the power structures, both foreign and domestic, inevitably contributed to fractures in the tradition. The great fractures of the late seventeenth century, which were the consequences of the end of

Turkish dominance and the imposition of Habsburg hegemony, as well as the significant religious divisions, have been healed or have healed themselves as a result of subsequent events and movements,²² but the possibility of such fractures have been by no means eliminated. The tradition of the 1956 revolution has only been incompletely passed on by the generation which made it to those who were their successors. The restoration of the continuity of tradition is always essential to the formulation and continuing vitality of a sense of historical consciousness. This too is one of the building blocks of that past consciousness so essential to the continuance of a nation and its peoples as an entity having both meaning and value beyond the satisfaction of fundamental needs.

In spite of the many difficulties inherent in the practice of history itself and coupled with the numerous concerns of the maintenance of the consciousness of the revolution, the historian must nonetheless maintain a sense of qualified optimism that the story will be told. Whether the story itself — and ever since the time of Herodotus the story has been the meaningful element — will create the needed conditions for the positive elucidation of the meaning of the revolution remains in the realm of speculation and hope, indispensable characteristics of both history and life.

However, that is beyond the competence of the historian to discuss.

Notes

1. János Berecz, *Counter-Revolution in Hungary: Words and Weapons*. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986); translation of the second expanded and revised Hungarian edition of 1981. Berecz is secretary of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.
2. This point is briefly and compellingly discussed by Stephen F. Cohen. "Stalin's Afterlife", *The New Republic*, December 29, 1979.
3. See especially the writings of István Csurka, *Az Elfogadhatatlan realitás* (New York: Püski, 1986), pp. 47–71.
4. Galgóczi, *Vidravas* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1984), p. 246.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
6. Csurka, pp.49–53.
7. I am making specific reference to the following series, but there were other similar publications; *Ellenforradalmi erők a magyar októberi eseményekben*, 4 vols. (Budapest: A Magyar Népköztársaság Minisztertanácsa Tájékoztatási Hivatala, no date, but app. 1958); also *Nagy Imre és büntérszai összeesküvése*, same publication details.
8. A good selection of such writings published in Hungary can be found in any bibliographical guide to materials on the Hungarian revolution, esp. the bibliography compiled by Ivan Halasz de Beky. One particularly offensive example is Ervin Hollós, *Kik voltak, mit akartak*, second corrected edition (Budapest: Kossuth, 1967).
9. Concerning these points see especially the writings of John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), *passim*.

10. For a very recent discussion of these points see my introduction to the posthumous volume; Bálint Hóman, *Ősemberek, ősmagyarok* (Atlanta, GA.: Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1985), pp. 11–17.
11. For a discussion of this point in a Hungarian context Ferenc Glatz, *Történetiró és politika* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980) and Zoltán Horváth, “Hungary: Recovering from the Past”, in Walter Laquer and George Mosse, eds., *The New History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 221–235.
12. Mihály Horváth, *Magyarország függetlenségi harcának története*, 3 vols. (Geneva, 1865); published also in Hungary after 1867.
13. Michael T. Kaufman, “Section 301, Where Hungary’s Past is Buried”, *The New York Times*, June 23, 1986, section A1, pp. 1 and 5; also, personal communications to this writer.
14. Personal communication to this writer; I also saw some of the collected materials pertaining to the Kerepesi cemetery gravesites.
15. Boris Pasternak, *Dr. Zhivago* (New York: Modern Library, 1958), p.483.
16. Based upon discussions with a number of Hungarian scholars and writers.
17. Evidence of this can be obtained from the proceedings of the Fiala Irók József Attila Köre; based upon discussions with a participant in their meetings. More recently there has been evidence of interest in 1956 among students and writers as well as in dissident circles; some of this was tied to the thirtieth anniversary in 1986 and caused some concern to the authorities. I followed these developments in the October and November 1986 issues of the *Foreign Area Broadcast Service*, Eastern Europe.
18. Berecz, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 142. A recent review of the Berecz volume by Ivan Volgyes in the *American Historical Review* (vol. 92, no 4, Oct. 1987, pp. 1003–1004) expressed similar concerns.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
21. The problem of *Zeitgeschichte* or the study of our own times is discussed by many philosophically inclined historians and is of some interest in the elucidation of these matters. However, it should be extended by a discussion of the psychology of memory and its ramifications for the analysis of memoirs.
22. For a more detailed exposition of these ideas see my article “Inter Arma...; Reflections on Seventeenth Century Educational and Cultural Life in Hungary and Transylvania”, in János Bak and Béla K. Király, eds., *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi: War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary* (New York, 1986, dist. by Columbia University Press), pp. 315–334.