

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Viktor Szabó:

**THE PROPAGANDA OF THE HUNGARIAN
SOVIET REPUBLIC**

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1. Antecedents of the research

Since the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, this period was a sensitive and controversial topic of Hungarian history. The Hungarian Soviet Republic was constantly in the crossfire of different historical interpretations.

The shock of defeat in World War I and the subsequent revolutions were deep impression the contemporaries. Therefore, shortly after 1918-19 they have already appeared those books that defined the historical perspective of the revolutions in the next 25 years.

Gyula Szekfű's book, entitled *Three Generations*, was a standard work in this period.¹ (The book was published several times.) Szekfű wrote in this publication to the bourgeois-democratic era, and especially the Soviet Republic belonged to the darkest periods of Hungarian history. This view until 1945, not only was prevalent in history, but also the public opinion and journalism has become dominant.

Several studies contained in the book *Bolshevism in Hungary*, which appeared in 1921.² (Edited by Gusztáv Gratz.) The primary purpose of the book was: to prove that Communism is not viable. The quality of the studies was quite variable. They were professional, objective

¹ Gyula Szekfű: *Három nemzedék*. [Three Generations] „ÉLET” Irodalmi és Nyomda R.T. , Budapest. 1920.

² Gusztáv Gratz (szerk.): *A bolsevizmus Magyarországon*. [Bolshevism in Hungary] Franklin Társulat, Budapest. 1921.

aspiring writings and far-right, anti-Semitic approach as well. József Balogh's study specifically dealing with the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which to this day is the most comprehensive work on this topic.³

Then long time, the historians not wrote about the Soviet Republic. They stayed away from the subject. Gustav Gratz wrote in 1935 the only high-quality work specifically about the revolutions. It was *The Age of Revolutions*. This work is worth highlighting because of aspiring objectivity, free from extremism tone.

Immediately after the 1945 the historians not wrote about the revolutions. The Stalinist ideology – and Mátyás Rakosi's expectations – was adequate summary volume: *History of the Hungarian people*.⁴ In this book, the Social Democrats and Bela Kun – along with other Communist leaders – appeared as a traitor.

After 1956 the perception of the events and participants of Soviet Republic has changed. The Kádár regime's propagandists have been specifically highlighted the theme of Commune. They presented it as the culmination of Hungarian history, the leaders were as role models to the masses. However, during this period, historians have gradually moved towards a more objective approach. This is both a political barriers slow the expansion was due, on the other hand, a new

³ József Balogh: *A propaganda.*[*The Propaganda*] In: Gusztáv Gratz (szerk.): *A bolsevizmus Magyarországon.*[*Bolshevism in Hungary*] Franklin Társulat, Budapest. 1921. 31-74.

⁴ Gusztáv Heckenast – Miklós Incze – Béla Karácsonyi – Lajos Lukács – György Spira: *A magyar nép története.* [*History of the Hungarian people*] Művelt Nép Könyvkiadó, Budapest. 1953.

generation of historians was a more objective approach. The studies were born in this period were Marxists, but they were factual, and has been professionally as well.⁵ Independent work specifically in relation to propaganda rather from its products (posters, pamphlets, musical works, movies) were born. The authors wrote only incidentally about the organization and the propaganda activities of the participants.⁶ After 1980, with the destabilization of the system, the possibilities of historians expanded. Also in this decade the historians wrote significant works, some of which have been advances in post-transition approach as well.⁷

⁵ Zsuzsa L. Nagy: *A párizsi békekonferencia és Magyarország 1918-1919.* [The Paris Peace Conference and Hungary, 1918-1919] Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1965. – Tibor Hajdu: *A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság.* [The Hungarian Soviet Republic] Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest. 1969. – Ervin Liptai: *Vöröskatonák előre!* [Red soldiers, Ahead!] Zrínyi Kiadó, Budapest. 1969. – Ignác Romsics: *A Duna melléki ellenforradalom.* [Counter-revolution next to the Danube] Valóság, 1977/1, 1977/2. It later appeared in book form: Ignác Romsics: *A Duna-Tisza köze hatalmi-politikai viszonyai 1918-19-ben* [Power-political situation in Central Hungary in 1918-19] Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest. 1982.

⁶ Farkas József: *Értelmiség és forradalom – Kultúra, sajtó és irodalom a Magyar Tanácsköztársaságban,* [Intellectuals and revolution - Culture, press and literature of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó 1984. – László Kővágó: *Internacionalisták a Tanácsköztársaságért.* [Internationalists in the Hungarian Soviet Republic] Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1969.

⁷ László Fogarassy: *A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság katonai összeomlása.* [The Hungarian Soviet Republic's military collapse] Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest. 1988. – Tibor Hajdu – Lóránt Tilkovszky (szerkesztők): *Magyarország története 1918-1919. 1919-1945* [History of Hungary 1918-1919. 1919-1945] Volume 8/1.

Since the democratic transition few publications have dealt with the subject (especially in the '90s). Experience has shown that in professional circles are not very popular this period. As a result, the public image of the revolution, unfortunately, largely shaped by the media and politics. The Kádár era emphatically positive approach to as a reaction, after the democratic change in public discourse virtually demonized the participants of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

After the democratic transition (especially in the 2000s) born again a kind of conservative, in terminology between the two world wars dating back, view of history. One interesting example Konrád Salamon's book, which is already in the title – *National self-destruction 1918-1920* – reflects this approach.⁸

Among the few works that are specifically dealing with the Hungarian Soviet Republic, are very important Boldizsár Vörös' research. He used the contemporary sources, and analysed in several studies the visualization of historical personalities, great predecessors and ideals in the propaganda of Commune.⁹

Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1988. – Mária Ormos: *Padovától Trianonig 1918-1920*. [From Padua to Trianon, 1918-1920] Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest. 1983. – Ernő Raffay: *Erdély 1918-1919-ben*. [Transylvania in 1918-1919] Magvető Könyvkiadó, Budapest. 1987.

⁸ Konrád Salamon: *Nemzeti önpusztítás 1918-1920*. [National self-destruction 1918-1920] Korona Kiadó, Budapest. 2001.

⁹ Boldizsár Vörös: „A múltat végképp eltörölni”? \ *Történelmi személyiségek a magyarországi szociáldemokrata és kommunista propagandában 1890-1919*. [„Of the past let us make a clean slate „\ *Historical personalities in the Social Democratic's and Communist's*

2. Research aims

In my research I tried to implement three major goals:

1. Detection the structure of the propaganda.
2. Identification the participants of propaganda, and research the social background of these persons.
3. Analysis the content, devices and target system of the propaganda.

I kept my primary task is to issue a clarification, that the dictatorship's propaganda work according to a well-organized system, or rather it was the sum of uncoordinated actions. To do this, first I had to create a picture of the propaganda associated organizational structure, distribution of tasks. It should clarify the question of how these organizations acted independently,

propaganda in Hungary 1890-1919] MTA Történettudományi Intézet, Budapest, 2004. – Boldizsár Vörös: *Károlyi Mihály tér, Marx-szobrok, fehér ló*. Budapest szimbolikus elfoglalása 1918–1919. [*Károlyi Mihály square, Marx statues, white horse, symbolic occupation of Budapest, 1918-1919*] *Budapesti Negyed*, 29–30. 2000/3–4. <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00003/00023/voros.html#23f> (Letöltés ideje: 2015. június 21.) – Boldizsár Vörös: *Két rendszer, két halott, két temetés*. [*Two systems, two dead, two funerals*] Médiakutató 2004 ősz. http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2004_03_osz/08_ket_rendszer (Download: 2015. december 4.) – Boldizsár Vörös: *Történelmi személyiségek ábrázolása a Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság hivatalos jellegű anyagaiban*. [*Representation of historical personalities in official substance of the Hungarian Soviet Republic*] Budapest, 1997. PhD Dissertation.

and how coordinated their activities. What was typical of this area: the centralization or decentralization? Therefore, the first milestone of the research was examining the propaganda-organization of Commune.

The second question was, who took part in this activity, which belonged to a particular social group or community and what their motives were.

The third milestone was to explore how to put into practice this propaganda activity. The propagandists what kind of methods, procedures and tools used to influence the masses.

Finally, based on the above criteria also, I tried to find answers to what extent have appeared the typical features of modern political propaganda in the propaganda of Commune.

3. Research methods and sources

This research has made it necessary to use more complex scheme, and to study several types of resources.

The organizational structure of the Soviet republic's propaganda I compiled on the basis the following materials: Hungarian National Archives "National Committee of the Hungarian Soviet Republic's Data Collection".

Research of participants was the most complex and the most time-consuming task. The personal data detection was necessary for a variety of encyclopaedias, biographies, autobiographies screening and research in

the Hungarian National Archives in birth-, marriage-, and funeral-registers, in FamilySearch online database, as well as in certain materials of the Budapest City Archives (Budapest Royal Prosecution documents 1919-1922, Budapest Royal Criminal Prison documents, Prisoner Registers 1919-1922). Prosopographical method helped to map to what these persons belonged to a particular social group, what kind of activities were conducted during the Commune and what positions had been filled. I have concluded that the decisive role of intellectuals was the propaganda of the Soviet Republic. In this connection, the question arose whether these individuals were involved in this activity based on the motivations. Very important aspect is that the person should have defined their own motivations, how they saw the Soviet Republic, and how they saw their own role in the Commune. I examined the available diaries, memoirs, autobiographical works, but professional biographical work on some people, and other related literature review also gave a lot of valuable information to clarify the issue. However, such analysis could only be performed if sufficient resources were available.

The third part of the research was to examine the propaganda materials. I presented a system of symbols and persons who are portrayed as role models. I have studied more than 350 printed publications (pamphlets, posters, musical works). I have analysed the leading articles of the two main newspapers (Népszava [People's Voice], Vörös Újság [Red News]), other kind of propaganda materials (newsreels, movies, buildings, statues), and more propaganda events. I researched in the

National Széchényi Library (Collection of Posters and Small Prints), in Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library (Budapest Collection), in ELTE University Library (Socialism History Collection), in Kiscelli Museum (Collection of Posters), in the Hungarian National Museum (Historical Photo Collection), in Hungarian National Digital Archive and Film Institute (Film Collection and online Newsreel Collection), in Hungarian Digital Picture-library, and in Arcanum Digital Collection database.

4. New scientific results

The primary objective of my doctoral dissertation was a detailed presentation the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. This brought new results in several ways.

Presentation of the organization so far isn't a novelty because the relevant information is already known, and some of them have also been published. Therefore, in my dissertation I tried to get an image from the mechanism of Commune's propaganda through a detailed presentation of propaganda organizations. As a result, it turned out that the Hungarian Soviet Republic's propaganda organization had the typical mistakes what had all institutions what set up during transition periods. The organizations (and their departments) functioned relatively independently, but their duties was not specified, so their activities often overlapped. The problems have been recognized during the Soviet

Republic period, so there have been many attempts to strengthen coordination of the propaganda activities and the stronger centralization of the organization. Despite all the efforts – and also probably because of the short time – during the existence of the Commune the organization of propaganda activities was decentralised.

The next question was: What social groups have been involved in propaganda activities? The result of the research was that the intellectuals, who were bourgeois backgrounds, played a significant role in the propaganda of the Commune. Their motivations were very varied. In the case of each person it could be of many different factors: faith, communist conviction, support for change and for the intention to improve things, shock of World War I, the crisis of capitalism, social sensitivity, armed defense of the country, opportunism, livelihood, fear. Important conclusion of this part of my research is that a large part of the propagandists was not a Communist. It draws attention to the need for a more nuanced approach to this period of history.

After examining the propaganda materials, were the following conclusions. Most of the symbols and role models consisted of the former British, French, German and Hungarian workers' struggles elements. It consists primarily of social democratic elements and some Russian Bolshevik elements. In the content of propaganda appeared often the idea of world revolution. This can be called one of the most important item of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. For this indication related to the First World War in a negative light, this was an important factor in the ideological justification of the

system. Another feature of the content of the propaganda was that the starting point – flaws of capitalism – actually existing problems, which was highly exaggerated appeared in propaganda. In contrast, the other side an utopian, obscure, not without a high degree of demagogy, though undoubtedly a positive set of promises appeared the building of communism in the future. However, I must highlight that a strong social charges has also appeared in propaganda. Those reports also recognized which were written after the fall of the Commune, that the council-government has tried to improve the situation of the poorest social groups. The "Russian model" obviously had an impact on the Hungarian Soviet Republic's propaganda. It was observable in presentation of precedent of the Russian people and highlighting the Bolshevik leaders' manifestations. However, in the propaganda of the Soviet Republic was to explore the social democratic stance survival. This is mostly appeared in the public debates between Social Democratic and Communist members of the Commune, but a number of former social-democratic propaganda materials have been released again. The propagandists considered the aspect, which is the way in which the message can be sent efficiently to the people. Although the majority of materials – according to the mass propaganda – want to speak to everyone, but there were a large number of others, which are targeted at specific social groups. In the latter case, the propagandists sought to deal with issues – in so format, style, and tone –, which is best suited for a specific target group. The propagandists have been used in their activities all the

most modern devices and techniques. It was observed the repetition of the same information in a variety of formats, which contributed to the greater fixation of these messages. The propagandists of Commune without a break, impulsively bombarded the people with different ways and formats repeating informations. The leaders of the Soviet Republic placed the education, culture and sport at the service of propaganda.

Taking into account the above factors, we can conclude that the propaganda of the Commune (both external features and tools, both in terms of methods) contained the main features of the modern political propaganda. So the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was an early example of the modern political propaganda.

This allows for future for us, through the examination of the Hungarian Soviet Republic's propaganda, that to obtain more information about the operating mechanism of the modern political propaganda.

5. Publication list¹⁰

1. *A háborús felelősség kérdése az 1918-19-es magyar és német kommunista propagandában.* [The issue of war responsibility in the German and Hungarian communist propaganda] In: Kiss László (szerk.): *Tanulmányok a 70 éves Németh István tiszteletére.* [Studies in honour of 70-year-old István Németh] Acta Academiae Agriensis. Nova Series Tom. XLIII. Sectio Historiae. Eger, Líceum Kiadó, 2015.
2. *A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság alkoholelles propagandája.* [The anti-alcohol propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] http://www.titteleki.hu/cikkek/A_Magyarországi_Tanácsköztársaság_alkoholelles_propagandája.pdf (2014)
3. *Az értelmiség szerepvállalása a Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság propagandájában.* [The role of the intelligentsia in the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] In: Ballabás Dániel (szerk.): *Doktorandusz hallgatók 1. konferenciája.* [1st Conference of doctoral students] Eger, EKF Líceum Kiadó, 2013.

¹⁰ Here only those publications are mentioned that are relevant to the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. My full publication list is available in MTMT (<https://www.mtmt.hu>) All publications were published in Hungarian.

4. *Zenészek és zeneszerzők a Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság propagandájában.* [Musicians and composers in the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] In: Sipos Balázs (szerk.): *A kommunizmus arcai.* [The faces of Communism] Budapest, Prima Forma Tudományos Egyesület, 2013.

6. *Művészek a Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság propagandájában.* [Artists in the propaganda of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] In: Gózszy Zoltán - Vitári Zsolt - Lengyel Gábor (szerk.): *Egyén és politikai gyakorlat* [Individual and political practice] Pécs, Pécsi Tudományegyetem, 2013.

7. *A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság toborzóplakátjai.* [Recruiting posters of the Hungarian Soviet Republic] http://www.titteleki.hu/cikkek/A_Magyarországi_Tanácsköztársaság_toborzóplakátjai.pdf (2013)

8. *A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság propagandájának szervezeti felépítése és személyi összetétele.* [Organizational construction and personal composition of the Hungarian Soviet Republic's propaganda] In: Keresztes Gábor (szerk.): *Tavaszi Szél, 2013 – Spring wind, 2013.* Budapest, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2013. 1-2. kötet.

9. A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság propagandaszerveinek működése. [*The operating of the Hungarian Soviet Republic's propaganda organizations*] In: Ballabás Dániel (szerk.): *Kultusz és propaganda. [Cult and Propaganda]* Eger, Líceum Kiadó, 2012.

10. *Budapesttől Hollywoodig – a Vörös Híradótól az Oscar-díjig: Kertész Mihály életútja.* [*From Budapest to Hollywood – from Red Newsreels to Academy Award: The life of Michael Curtiz*]

http://www.tittleki.hu/cikkek/Budapesttol_Hollywoodig.pdf
(2010)

11. *Háború és diplomácia Magyarországon 1918-1919.* [*War and diplomacy in Hungary, 1918-1919*] Budapest, Prima Forma Tudományos Egyesület, 2009.