Theses of PhD Dissertation

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From Scouting to Communism. The Alternatives of the „Sickle” Movement in Czechoslovakia in the Interwar Period

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1. The antecedents of the research

In the self-definition of Hungarians coming under Czechoslovak rule after the treaty of peace of Trianon as well as in the ways they coped with the new situation the first generation of minority intelligentsia played an important role the members of which met in the scouting groups of Czechoslovakia and one of the strongest groups of which organized itself as a movement under the name “Sarló” (Sickle) in summer 1928. The young generation considered the evaluation and handling of the national and social problems that were strengthened in the minority situation to be their prime task and by putting these into the focus and connecting them leftist orientation gradually became more and more emphatic.

The main reason why we deemed the rethinking of the Sickle significant was that whereas it belongs to the favourite topics of Hungarian historiography in Slovakia the Sickle and its ideological changes have hitherto been treated in a simplified way in the major part of historical literature. In the decades of the Communist era both the members of the Sickle themselves and historians regarding leftist values as absolute glorified the history of the movement just as much it was neglected or condemned as devilish after the change of the political system.

From the literature of the interwar period the “generation summary” written by Lajos Jócsik in 1939 under the title Iskola a magyarságra has to be mentioned and underlined. The work of Jócsik fits into the line of “returning” books having been written after the First Vienna Award it recalls the twenty years of the generation. Next to the importance of his childhood memories and minstrelsy he incorporated the debates and actions related to the Sickle movement into his work.\(^1\)

In the Communist period the work of Edgár Balogh under the title Hét próba was published in 1965 and re-published later. Also, Endre Kovács wrote a work titled Korszakváltás. Both are memoires of the interwar period recalling the Sickle movement.\(^2\) The memoire written by Balogh discusses the short organizational history of the Sickle movement. The book written in the mid-60s, however, relied in delineating its history on the ideological aspects characteristic of Hungarian circumstances of contemporary Rumania, therefore, it needs to be treated with criticism. The same holds true of the memoire Korszakváltás written by Endre Kovács although he is much more impartial and critical than Balogh in featuring the movement.

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The volume called *Ez volt a Sarló* appeared on the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Sickle in 1928, i.e. in a sub-period of the Kádár era that could be characterized as a kind of political approach to Hungarians living in minority. In the volume studies and memoirs of the members of the generation were published. The authors of the book were members of the generation in question, among others András Balázs, Edgár Balogh, László Dobossy, László Ferencz, Ferenc Horváth, Ernő Nagyidai. The volume collecting the documents and the bibliography of the movement contains altogether fourteen studies. The analyses treated the role of the Sickle from a number of aspects. As, however, this summary was published in the years of the one-party-system, too, from the point of view of ideas the arguments and statements of this representative work meant for the anniversary are strongly in need of criticism.

From the memoirs the “back-projection” work of Peéry Rezső needs to be mentioned, who lived in West Germany after 1948 and thus worked without ideological and censorship restrictions that appeared in 1994 under the title *A végzet bábjátéka avagy Peremmagyarok az idő sodrában*. These render a modulation to the Communist narrative of Balogh and Kovács. As a matter of fact, down to the change of political system mostly idealized, politically biased works were published on the movement. Although Deborah Cornelius, a US historian gave an ideologically impartial assessment in his doctoral thesis in English, he only gave a brief glimpse into the archival sources on the basis of which we can come to a more precise picture of the multi-factor procedure of the ideological changes of the movement. Whereas the analyses of the Communist period focusing on the labour movement considered the Communist turn of the movement exemplary and necessary, after the change of the political system a sort of demonized “red Sickle” picture seems to be evolving. The hypercritical reassessment of the “Communist Sickle” is well exemplified by the analysis of Gyula Popély under the title *Ez volt a Sarló*.  

On the basis of the abovementioned works, since 2014, we have endeavoured to evaluate the Sickle from many perspectives and deconstruct the movement thereby trying to
arrive to a realistic picture of the Sickle that would take personal aspects into consideration, too. One can find further information of our studies and articles written on the topic in our bibliography.

2. Purposes

The picking of the topic of our research and the writing of this thesis was motivated by the endeavour realistically to evaluate the Sickle which was an especially active and productive intellectual movement in voicing the minority alternatives in the first minority period of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. In fact, there is still no general understanding among historians in the assessment of the movement. This is mainly due to the ideological labels stuck to the Sickle as well as the evaluations deeming the Communist turn of a part of the leaders of the movement absolute.

For the generation born in the early 20th century the experience of minority situation was different from that of their parents, after all, the identity of the “fathers” was fundamentally determined by the reality and memory of Greater Hungary prior to 1918. This first generation becoming mature in the new minority situation, however, conceived of the new situation as a given reality. This inherently contained the alternative of the evolution of a new “minority identity” the study of which constituted another essential starting point of our thesis.

Therefore, the aim of the thesis is to assess the history of the Sickle movement realistically along with the examination of how the young intellectuals forming a close intellectual community in the organization for a couple of years viewed the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. Also, the dissertation depicts the consequences of the change of the imperia as well as the constant conflicts of citizenship and national loyalty. In our examination the personal social, ideological and world view differences of the members of the Sickle and the delineation of the motifs will be highlighted, too. Light will be thrown upon the deeper reasons for the inherent conflicts of the movement which in our hope could lead to a sophisticated featuring of the Sickle. It is our purpose to carry out an unbiased and balanced thoroughgoing evaluation which no-one has set out to do so far with respect to the entire history of the Sickle.

At the same time, in elaborating the fabric of the dissertation we consider it important to depict the contemporary social, cultural as well as political characteristics of Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia. Within the frameworks of this we outlined the characteristic
features of the question of generations, the significance of the engagement of the intellectual and partly political élite and the dilemmas of individual and group forms of identity of Hungarians living in minority.

The basic task of our thesis is to elaborate and evaluate as realistically and authentically and from as many aspects as possible the role and place of the members of the Sickle as a generation group and movement as well as the intellectuals making soaring progress in their careers and making essential professional achievements. All this we did in the hope that the memory of the generation that evidently played an important and positive role in the overall picture of the history of minorities in the 20th century would not be determined by extremist approaches, i.e. by gestures and voices of undiscerning raving enthusiasm on the one hand and limitless hatred on the other.

3. The means of examination and the sources

The most significant sources of the examination were constituted by the personal, biographical documents of the members of the Sickle movement: memoires, interviews, correspondence along with articles, debates, statements and the like which appeared in dailies and periodicals of contemporary Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This renders the thesis discussing the ideological changes of the group of the Sickle strongly determined by ideological features. It was not our purpose to write the biographies of the members of the movement but to arrive at a deeper understanding of the evolution of the intellectual group of the Sickle by means of analyzing the biographical documents the most of which they themselves provided.

Thus in the one and a half decades examined it is especially the lives of the leaders of the movement (Edgár Balogh, Lajos Jócsik, the Dobossy brethren, Endre Kovács or Rezső Szalatnai) that we could follow with attention. The majority of the source material was

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7 The plasticity of the notion of biography is an invitation for various ways to interpret it. This is discussed by Zsolt K. Horváth in his study under the title Az életrajzi térről which widened the circle of strictly understood biographical sources. Cf. K. Horváth Zsolt: Az életrajzi térről. Szempontok a biográfiai módszer és a szinoptikus szemlélet történeti alkalmazásához. Korall, 2011/44. http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00414/00035/pdf/Korall_44_K_Horvath.pdf (2017. 05. 25.).


The present research distances itself from both methods and can rather be connected to the genre of collective biography. It needs to be underlined, however, that the study does not endeavour to give an overall picture of the persons who belonged to the Sickle. Nevertheless, the main sources of the dissertation are provided by the personal documents of biographical character thereby putting the biographical approach into the foreground.
provided by the Sickle Collection of the Déri Museum in Debrecen where one can find 139 boxes of documents collected by Zoltán Boros, a former member of the Sickle.

The comparison of the contemporary and later writings of the members constituted a severe hardship in methodology which was of key importance in terms of a realistic assessment of the picture and views that were present among the contemporaries, in the years between 1938 and 1944 as well as in the Communist era. As regards the investigation of the conflicts of generations the documents of the press between the two World Wars was of primary assistance. Of the contemporary newspapers it is worth mentioning the A Mi Lapunk from Losonc (Lučenec) that became the forum of the members of the Sickle as well as the leaflet Vetés. Later on, important organs were the A Nap from Pozsony (Bratislava) and A Reggel. These were activist papers i. e. basically in support of the government.

Following the Communist turn of the Sickle the leftist paper Az Út edited by Zoltán Fábry published the writings of persons belonging to the movement on a number of occasions. Furthermore, the most important political daily of the Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia, the Prágai Magyar Hírlap also furnished essential data on the movement and activity of youngsters. Based on the aforementioned papers we can get a glimpse into the inner and external debates that constituted a significant part of the self-determination and ideological development as well as choices of the members of the Sickle.

Of the contemporary (personal) material the correspondence we could find in the collection of the Sickle Collection of the Déri Museum in Debrecen and the various bequests, e.g the bequest material of Rezső Szalatnai in the Manuscript Division of the Hungarian Academy of Science or the Archives of the Fórum Institute of Minority Research give especially valuable data in delineating the concepts of the members of the Sickle.

We can have an insight into contemporary government standpoints of Hungary and Czechoslovakia first and foremost with the assistance of the materials of the Ministry of Interior of the National Archives of Hungary, especially the reports issued by the police as well as the documents of diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, consular and embassy reports. Among these the political documents of the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is especially valuable (MNL OL K 63). At the same time one definitely needs to mention the documents relating on the leftists movements in Czechoslovakia (MNL OL K 149) which contain some of the most important cases of the Ministry of Interior with regard to nationality, labour movement and other confidential documents. These also furnish important contributions to the monitoring of the members of the Sickle in Hungary and the assessments made by the police. Also, the data found within the documents of the Ministry of Interior of
the Czech National Archives reflecting the standpoint of the contemporary Czechoslovak government (in 1929) were of much avail. This was completed by the material on the Sickle in the Slovak National Archives in the Pozsony (Bratislava) division of the Ministry of Interior which came to the Sickle Collection of the Déri Museum in the course of the research made by László Szarka.

4. New academic results

Based on what we have found in the course of our research we maintain that in line with the internal reshuffling of the movement the ten to fifteen people who played a decisive role in the Sickle constantly altered. The leaders mainly recruited from Pozsony (Bratislava) and Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky) were supplemented by persons coming from the central or eastern regions of Slovakia. Undoubtedly, the main leader of the Sickle was Edgár Balogh. He had an indisputable role not only in organizing the scouts but also in defining the ideas of the movement. It is evident from the biographical sources, the correspondence and the memoirs that Balogh, who since 1931 on exercised a major share in the radically leftist, Communist orientation and change of direction of the Sickle, organized his movement often fanatically and almost dictatorially. It was a common basis within the group that the position and environment of the families of the young people was largely and negatively affected by the inescapable change in the way of life. This was due to the tension between the positions taken in the old and new states accompanied by a kind of social uncertainty, loss of social positions, a certain kind of becoming déclassé. This regularly went hand in hand with the inner conflicts of national, citizen loyalty and the phenomena of consequent identity crisis.

For the first generation that was socialized in the minority status the evidences of strong Hungarian national and leftist tinged social mission consciousness, intellectual, youth and self-organizing forms such as literary and debating societies and the scouting provided means of dissolving the cultural and national tensions between the family and school educations.

Because of the difficulties in the choice of the language of education and of the social position the mainly Czech (Prague, Brno as well as Pozsony/Bratislava) university

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10 DDM SGy. Rendségi bizalmas jelentések a Sarlóról, a sarlósokról, a Szent György Kőrről és csehszlovákiai Magyar írókról, az első Csehszlovák Köztársaság idejéből. Szarka László kutatásai Csehszlovákiában a sarlósok után. DSX. 86. 1198. 1–8.
environment exercised a similarly fundamental impact on most of the members of the generation group. Meanwhile, at the beginning, the cultivation of Hungarian identity, the satisfaction of Hungarian cultural demands and the maintenance of Hungarian community space constituted the priority task for them. For this reason in 1925 in Prague the Saint George Circle, a veteran scouting group was founded that soon became the workshop of the creation of the new generation mentality. Through the minstrelsy initiated by Hungarian student veteran boyscouts of Prague in Southern Slovakia and the Subcarpathians the world of the Hungarian minority village as well as the folklore concept determined the social activity ideas and plans of the new generation and bound them to the environment they were coming from. Nevertheless, it is conspicuous from their early writings, too, that next to the populist line they tried to define themselves via constantly changing, often obscure, first religious and later more and more radical ideological formulae.

In the second half of 1926 the founders of the Sickle made a move from veteran scouting and youth organization in the direction of the more widely understood social participation. Next to the contemporary publications it is reflected in the vivid correspondence in the course of which Edgár Balogh shared his political, movement and major ideological plans with his friends. The tensions resulting from the shortcomings of the minority policy of the Czechoslovak government constrained the group to elaborate a more and more independent political line. A further important impulse was given by the opposition to the conservative, Christian-national government ideology of official Hungary. This unavoidably confronted them with the policy of mere grievances of the Hungarian opposition parties in Czechoslovakia directed from Budapest.

Following the little inter-troop jamboree held in Gombaszög in 1928 where the Sickle was established, the ideas of the youth were more and more formed by leftist, Socialist orientation. The radicalization of the social reform ideas of the members of the Sickle movement even more provoked the antipathy of the culture managers and politicians of the minority Hungarian bourgeois parties subjected to grievances policy. Due to the conflicts that evolved within scouting from 1928 on two lines were separated: a conservative-traditionalist and a progressive “minstrel” line. This was the time when the role of the Socialist-oriented Sickle members (besides Balogh Imre Dobossy, Mihály Csáder and Béla Forgách) gained real significance. They led the seminars in Pozsony (Bratislava). Also, in the formation of the characteristic ideological profile of the group the fact that they accepted to play a bridge role had great importance. Next to the connections to the Hungarian minority communities this set them an essential task in linking the peoples of the Carpathian Basin. This they envisaged
mainly to realize via the development of the cultural connections between Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks.

At any rate, since March 1929 the leftist, Socialist orientation of the Sickle had been clear. The exact definition of this, however, remained obscure. This was partly due to the fact that the most influential directors of the new ideological orientation of the movement (Lajos Kassák, Zoltán Fábry and then Lajos Barta) also tried to determine the targets of the re-orientation and the members themselves were had different standpoints in many respects, too. This was the way the core of the movement arrived in 1929 from ethical socialism to the investigation and pledge of scholarly Marxism.

In any case, in 1930 the Sickle was closer to extreme leftist, Communist ideas than to the government-supporting activity characteristic of Social Democrats. In fact, by late 1930 some of the leaders of the Sickle started to identify themselves with Communist ideology. This happened primarily in a self-educated form which was accompanied by the symptoms of continuous ideological crisis and ideological detachment in different directions in the leadership of the movement.

In 1931 a part of the leaders of the Sickle came to start Communist activity as a party. This decision was the odd consequence of a long process which had many components, a result that was fatal with respect to the movement. From the time on when the movement was launched in 1928 the pattern of Communist orientation popular with Czech and Slovak young intellectuals as well as the severed links to Hungary interfered with the history of the leftist orientation. The approach to Communism had been present from childhood in a part of the Hungarian leftist intellectual generation in southern Slovakia as a consequence of the economic and social disadvantages and the discrimination stemming from the minority status. A considerable part of the leaders and members of the group came to the conviction that for the Sickle isolated in the Hungarian minority political struggles the approach to the Hungarian intellectual environment of the Czechoslovak Communist Party could mean a way out. This was only further reinforced by the Communist intellectual dissent in Prague and Pozsony (Bratislava) present at the universities from the 1920s on as well as by the experience made in the field trips in France in the course of which they got acquainted with the Communist ideas of Western Europe and its ideological and art trends whereby they sensed the mobilizing power of Communist ideas. Edgár Balogh played a central role in the ideological transformation of the Sickle which conceived of social reforms more and more from a Marxist standpoint. The “Sickle-leader” who had an inclination for extremism concentrated more and more on pushing the interests of the student movement into the
background and align the movement with Communism. The unsettled nature of his Czechoslovak citizenship along with his déclassé family in Pozsony (Bratislava) and his difficult social situation, the hardships of his Prague years contributed to the growingly pronounced, fanatic and radical Communist orientation of the group.

The preparations for the Congress of the Sickle in Pozsony (Bratislava) organized to evaluate the “wanderings in sociography” in September 1931 as well as its proceedings and outward form of appearance and publications all furnished evidence of the connections of the movement to Communism.

The Communist turn, however, did not only deepen the tensions of ideas within the movement but also meant that the leadership of the Sickle got more and more separated from the students and thereby the organization of the intellectual reserves became very difficult.

In fact, after 1931 many of the leaders of the movement joined for a short time the Czechoslovak Communist Party that was legal in Czechoslovakia and was successfully present in southern Slovakia in the districts populated by Hungarians where they managed to achieve good results at elections.

As can be seen, the internal differentiation of the Sickle, the process of the rise of division lines within the movement started as soon as 1931. This was aptly shown by the ideological conflicts among the members. Moreover, the majority of the members were unable to identify themselves with the leadership which put “revolutionary ideas” into the foreground. Some of them oriented themselves towards other socially active organizations such as the Prohászka Circles of the Christian Democrats or the Hungarian Association that propagated national unity. The spread of the Trotskyist line among some members of the Sickle worked against the restoration of ideological unity. Others rather distanced themselves from the movement because of their duties that affected their personal lives.

In the ideological debates that sharpened because of the economic crisis the Communist Sickle members were seen as growingly suspicious elements in Czechoslovakia. This is proved by the fact, too, that Edgár Balogh was expelled from the country for the reason of his uncertain citizenship in 1935 by the political police. At the same time, the members of the Sickle were more and more intensively monitored by the Hungarian foreign affairs representatives and the Czechoslovak police authorities alike.

At any rate, the Sickle which was mystified by many as a means of organizing the Hungarian community in Czechoslovakia yet considered by others as fundamentally wrong lived as a movement working in organized forms only for 5 to 6 years and therefore could even be handled as a passing episode. On the contrary, the professional, intellectual and
political achievements of the intellectual members of the group such as in terms of minority self-definition, Hungarian community building and organization or in setting and accepting cultural and social tasks as well as in the field of elaborating the methods of orientation in minority status furnish an example which has hitherto remained unsurpassed by the leaders of minority Hungarian public life. In the community ideals of the members of the Sickle the depressing questions of the differences of villages and towns, the exposed situation of peasantry and wage workers were seen as soon as at that time as burning problems without the solution of which the national tasks of minority status would remain unresolved, too.

Although after the signing of the treaty of peace of Trianon the generation of the Sickle raised under minority conditions often acted under the influence of the strains of thought of the time, in search for alternatives for giving a response to social and national problems and in setting and partly fulfilling the minority tasks conceived of as a mission in behalf of the community they can be esteemed as one of the most important intellectual groups in the century-old history of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. Its major merit was its ability to harmonize individual interests with the work for the community which made it possible that after the break-up of the movement every member could act for the original targets of the Sickle in the sphere of his own profession.\textsuperscript{11}

Furthermore, although the dispersion of the generation through individual interests, impacts of home and foreign policy, ideological and political turns had come about by the mid-1930s, i.e. within a couple of years, the persons who participated in the movement considered it essential to maintain the connections to each other down to the end of their lives. The regular correspondence between the members of the Sickle gives a hint and so does the fact that Zoltán Boross initiated the festivities of the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Sickle in Debrecen in 1978 where a number of members participated. Thereby the idea of the creation of the Sickle Collection in the Déri Museum in Debrecen was founded as well.

\textsuperscript{11} The special values of the Sickle were acknowledged by some people as soon as in the 1930s. This is proved by the positive attitude of the canon Miklós Pfeiffer who was the organizer of the Prohászka Circles, often seen as the main opponent. In his 1939 statements he underlined the sincerity of the intention of the members of the Sickle to help with the solution of social problems. Pfeiffer Miklós: Kérdések vonalán. Iratfán történelem. Új Élet, 1939/7. 395–397.
5. List of publications\textsuperscript{12}

Studies


A csehszlovákiai magyar értelmiségi csoportok önmeghatározási kísérletei az első Csehszlovák Köztársaságban. A Sarló mint baloldali értelmiségi alternatíva. Soňa Gabzdilová – Attila Simon: Prístupy k riešení národnostnej otázky v medzivojnovom Československu. Univerzita J. Selyeho, Komárno, 2014. 154-163. file:///C:/Users/nay1/Downloads/pr%C3%ADstupy%20k%20rie%C5%A1eniu%20n%C3%A1rodnostnej%20ot%C3%A1zky%20v%20medzivojnovom%20%C4%8Ceskoslovensku%20(8).pdf


\textsuperscript{12} In this issue of theses only the publications related to the topic of the dissertation are contained. My entire list of publications is accessible in the MTMT database.


Press articles


