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Education and Politics.

Higher Education Institutions in Szeged during the Period of Revolution and Communist Retaliation (1956–1958)

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Introduction. Rationale for the Topic

The 1956 Revolution constitutes one of the most critical turning points in 20th-century Hungarian history, with significance that extended far beyond Hungary's borders. The outbreak of the 1956 Revolution could not have occurred without shifts in the international geopolitical landscape; however, it equally required the explosion of societal tensions that had accumulated under the totalitarian Rákosi regime.

Although the regime's systemic decay was already apparent by 1956, the decisive impetus toward revolution came from university students. Prominent among them were the students of Szeged, who gathered in the *Auditórium Maximum* of the university's Faculty of Arts to articulate demands that, within days, became the shared platform of the broader student body and, subsequently, the general demands of Hungarian society as a whole.

Although the war of independence was ultimately crushed by Soviet intervention—upon whose ruins the restoration of the communist regime began under a Soviet-backed puppet government led by János Kádár—the revolution left an indelible mark on Hungary, and its ripples were felt worldwide.

Prior to 1989, at least within Hungary, public discourse, academic research, and historical publications concerning the revolution were dominated by narratives aligned with the interests of the party-state. These accounts were inherently false, or occasionally contained partial truths manipulated for ideological purposes.

Following the regime change, a widespread re-evaluation, re-examination, and scholarly investigation of 1956 commenced in both public discourse and academic circles, finally enabling former participants to freely commemorate the events of the revolution and freedom fight. At the same time, alongside new historical works and public discourses portraying the events of 1956 as a revolutionary process aimed at establishing national independence and democracy, opinions defining 1956 as a counter-revolution became marginalized and received minimal publicity. Nevertheless, such narratives undeniably persisted to a non-negligible extent within Hungarian society, primarily maintained by (former) individuals of communist conviction who had lived through the events. A significant development following the transition is that 1956, as a whole, has become one of the most intensively researched topics in domestic historiography.

As part of this scholarly trajectory, research emerged on the university and college youth movements that played a prominent role in the revolution, detailing their history by drawing on a wide array of sources. Nonetheless, a comprehensive, monograph-length analysis of the subject remains absent to this day.

The history of the university and college movements in Szeged, as well as that of their leaders, has already been partially researched. Written memoirs by several former participants have already been published, which facilitates historiographical work.

My doctoral dissertation is grounded in my previous research, which has been significantly expanded for this study. In addition to outlining the antecedents leading up to the revolution, the dissertation presents the events extending until 1958, which ran parallel to the retaliations following the suppression of the revolution and freedom fight, and ultimately led to the liquidation and transformation of the student movements in Szeged, as well as the monopolization of the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ). Furthermore, the thesis relies substantially on integrating findings, testimonies, and narratives from my previously unpublished interviews with former participants.

This dissertation aims to provide the most comprehensive overview to date of the history of university and college youth movements in Szeged between 1956 and 1958. While it analyzes the empirical details of this history, the oral history methodology employed herein also allows the work to be considered a form of primary-source publication.

The first chapter introduces the historiographical background, focusing on research on the revolution, the educational system, and higher-education youth movements. The second chapter delineates the general historical context of the topic. Following this, the third chapter reviews the evolution of the educational system, with particular emphasis on the transformation of higher education, which serves as the immediate context for the subject under investigation. The fourth chapter presents several theoretical approaches, specifically regarding narrative memory and historical memory, that facilitate the interpretation of the research findings.

Consequently, the events of the weeks preceding and the months following the revolution, as well as the period between October 23 and November 4, 1956, constitute an exceptionally turbulent and profound era. These events became a defining, lifelong experience for an entire generation; for days or weeks, these young individuals could rightfully feel they had taken their nation's destiny into their own hands. This was an experience denied to the young intelligentsia of the subsequent three decades. It represented an unprecedented moment in the history of Hungarian higher education, as university and college students, together with the faculty members who supported them, became catalysts for events of global historical significance.

This process—in addition to its significance for world and national history—exerted a profound impact on the operation of domestic higher education institutions, including those in

Szeged. On the one hand, this manifested in the formulation and enforcement of academic, social, and political demands regarding the institutions; on the other hand, it exercised a direct influence on institutional governance (student autonomy and interest representation, as well as institutional autonomy). Furthermore, following the defeat of the revolution and the freedom fight, a new era began in personal conditions as well as in political, academic, social, and educational governance. Although this era broke with the transformations implemented before and during the revolution, it nonetheless represented a multi-dimensional shift compared to the period preceding the autumn of 1956.

II. Research Objectives and Research Questions

The objective of this research is to delineate the causes and processes that culminated in the 1956 democratic endeavor of the university and college student body in Szeged, which served as the initial step toward the revolution, or, as it were, the spark that ignited it. Additionally, it aims to analyze the morale, attitudes, motivations, and activities of higher-education participants from the pre-revolutionary period through the conclusion of the university disciplinary proceedings. This timeframe encompasses the precursors to the establishment of the revolutionary MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students), its founding, reorganization, and dissolution, as well as the inauguration and nascent operations of KISZ (Hungarian Communist Youth League).

A further objective of the research is to uncover the constructs of the former actors and to examine how the chain of events (causes and consequences) is manifested in individual memory. The study of historical memory conceptualizes memory as an individual system, while simultaneously emphasizing its communal embeddedness. Consequently, this thesis addresses concepts related to 1956, such as collective memory, cultural and communicative memory, and the distinction between cold and hot memory.

A further objective of this research is to explore the constructs of the former actors and to examine how the chain of events (causes and consequences) is manifested in individual memory. Historical memory research conceptualizes memory as an individual system while simultaneously emphasizing its community-bound nature. Therefore, in relation to the events of 1956, this thesis introduces concepts such as collective memory, cultural and communicative memory, and the distinction between "cold" and "hot" memory.

The research also aimed to identify as many university citizens as possible—by name, status, and sanction—who demonstrably faced retribution following the communist restoration for their involvement in the 1956 revolution.

Given the historical and educational-historical background, as well as the areas previously unexplored in prior research on this topic, I have formulated the following research questions:

1. What processes transformed the university and college youth of Szeged into one of the initiating actors of the 1956 Revolution?
2. How was the MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students) established in Szeged, and in what ways did its operation, legitimacy, and self-conceptualization differ from those of the preceding communist youth organization?
3. What role did the university youth of Szeged, specifically MEFESZ, play in shaping the local events of the 1956 Revolution, and how did this integrate into the nationwide processes?
4. Through what means and by what rationale did the emerging Kádár regime dismantle the revolutionary university youth movements in Szeged between 1956 and 1958?

III. Research Methodology, Sources, and Theoretical Framework

My doctoral dissertation is primarily grounded in a traditional historical approach to education. However, I consider it essential for the thesis to reflect upon certain theoretical frameworks that may prove beneficial in interpreting the findings.

The history of education is a discipline with a distinct status, the development of which is significantly influenced by its dual allegiance to educational and historical science. The theoretical frameworks, methods, and sources it employs, as well as the phenomena it investigates, are closely aligned with both historiography and pedagogy. Concurrently, owing to the contemporary prevalence of multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary approaches, educational historiography has become increasingly receptive to other social sciences, as well as their respective methodologies and theoretical paradigms. The approaches applied in this study similarly reflect this plural affiliation.

The research methodologies utilized herein comprise historical document analysis—often regarded as traditional in (educational) historical research—and oral history.

In the course of this study, alongside a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, I uncover and analyze original archival documents, contemporary press publications, and other primary sources. The findings obtained through document and textual analysis are

complemented by narrative research, whose background and source material are provided by interviews conducted within the methodological framework of oral history. The primary sources of the research were predominantly drawn from the records of the National Archives of Hungary, Archives of Csongrád-Csanád County (Fond XXXIII, Record Group 3, Storage Units 1–18 / Archive of the Csongrád County Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, 1957; Fond XXVI, Record Group 3, Records of the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Science at József Attila University, Faculty Meeting Minutes, 1952–1957), as well as the documents of the Faculty Council Minutes of the Faculty of Arts (1956–57, 10/N/30) housed in the Archives of the University of Szeged.

In addition, I review contemporary issues of selected press publications (*Délmagyarország*, *Szeged Népe*, *Szegedi Néplap*, *Egyetemi Lapok*, *Felsőoktatási Szemle*, *Hétfői Hírlap*, *A Jövő Mérnöke*, *Magyar Ifjúság*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *Népszabadság*, *Szabad Ifjúság*, *Szabad Nép*). Furthermore, as previously indicated, I conducted oral history interviews with former leaders and activists of MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students) and KISZ (Hungarian Young Communist League), the most relevant sections of which have been organically integrated into this dissertation.

IV. Research Findings

The primary objective of my doctoral dissertation was to analyze the history of youth movements in higher education in Szeged during the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight, as well as the subsequent periods of retaliation and consolidation. The chronological scope of this study is bounded, on one hand, by the events immediately preceding the revolution in 1956, and on the other, by the year 1958. This outer limit marks the consolidation of the restored communist regime, the eradication of the final remnants of democratically organized, grassroots youth organizations, the imposition of (first-instance) judicial sentences and other sanctions against members of the university community during the reprisals, and the stabilization of KISZ.

The research originates from the fundamental premise that the events of 1956 cannot be interpreted exclusively within a political-historical framework, but are closely intertwined with the radical transformation of the educational system—particularly universities and colleges—during the 1950s, as well as with the experiences and social status of university youth. An overview of the main trajectories in the historiography of 1956 and research in the history of education highlights that while the 1956 Revolution is one of the most thoroughly

explored topics in Hungarian historiography, the role of the educational system, and specifically that of university and college students, remains a partially unexamined area to this day, particularly in the context of the post-revolutionary reprisals and consolidation.

This dissertation delineates the political, social, and educational policy processes of the Rákosi era. The nationalization of the school system, the ideological restructuring of higher education, the ascendancy of cadre politics, and the marginalization of professional considerations in education generated tensions that directly contributed to the emergence of discontent among university youth. A key finding of this thesis is that the student movements of 1956 and the demands they articulated were not merely spontaneous reactions to the political events of that year, but were deeply rooted in the social and higher-education tensions of the era.

The core of the research consists of a detailed, chronological analysis of the history of university and college youth movements in Szeged. The dissertation presents the student organizations of the early 1950s, followed by a comprehensive analysis of the precursors, circumstances, and the program for establishing the Association of Hungarian University and College Students (MEFESZ). Throughout the revolution, the university and college youth of Szeged played a decisive role. A novel contribution of the thesis is that the scope of the investigation is not limited to the suppression of the revolution, but also provides a detailed analysis of the subsequent period. The chapters analyzing the post-revolutionary era outline the formation of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) 's youth policy, the creation of the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ), and the processes taking place in the higher education institutions in Szeged between November 1956 and the summer of 1958.

One of the most significant findings of the research is that, building upon previous similar registers and the results of my own archival research, the most comprehensive list to date of the victims of the post-revolutionary reprisals has been successfully compiled. This list is presented in Appendix I of the dissertation. During the period under review, numerous faculty members and students faced disciplinary proceedings. Among them, 22 individuals were sentenced to imprisonment by final judgment, while at least 12 additional persons were incarcerated for various durations without a final verdict. Fearing or suffering retaliation, several individuals were forced to leave the university or flee the country. The extensive nature of the reprisal is well demonstrated by the fact that at least 261 identifiably named members of the university community were subjected to some form of sanction. The compilation and publication of their roster constitutes one of the scholarly achievements of

this thesis.

I believe that this dissertation contributes to Hungarian historiography and the history of education by exploring a previously partially unexamined area using new primary sources. Hopefully, its findings will contribute to a better understanding of the history of higher education in Szeged and will nuance the existing narrative within historiography and educational history regarding the 1956 Revolution and the early Kádár era.

V. Research Discussion

The research questions can be addressed through the following summary conclusions.

1. What processes transformed the university and college youth of Szeged into one of the initiating actors of the 1956 Revolution?

According to the findings of this study, the mobilization of students in Szeged cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it was the culmination of multi-layered processes. Chief among these was the restructuring of higher education. This reorganization, carried out along Soviet lines, brought about significant transformations in Szeged's higher education system. It led to the fragmentation of the unified university and to the establishment of the Medical University of Szeged. The implementation of party control effectively dismantled university autonomy; the democratic election of leaders was replaced by party-approved appointments, while substantive decision-making authority was transferred to Academic Departments and party organizations. Contemporary consensus suggested that these changes compromised the quality of education. These experiences are directly reflected in the demands formulated in Szeged. Alongside general political, educational, and social demands, the MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students) program on October 20 included a demand for the restoration of university autonomy. This objective subsequently appeared in the nationwide demands as well.

The antecedents of the 1956 student movement stemmed partly from the lingering memory of interwar and postwar student associations, and partly from deep-seated resentment toward the Rákosi regime. The political thaw following Stalin's death and Imre Nagy's rise to power (1953) granted somewhat greater latitude for movement activities. The immediate precursors included the political and public turbulence during the summer and autumn of 1956, which

occurred in parallel with the progressive erosion of credibility of the communist youth organization (DISZ).

2. How was the MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students) established in Szeged, and in what ways did its operation, legitimacy, and self-conceptualization differ from those of the preceding communist youth organization?

The thesis demonstrated in detail that the establishment of MEFESZ in Szeged occurred within a few days and resulted from deliberate organizational efforts. MEFESZ diverged from prior communist youth organizations—most notably DISZ—in three fundamental aspects. First, whereas DISZ was structured hierarchically via centralized top-down decisions, MEFESZ was a grassroots initiative that dismantled the party-state's monopoly over youth organizations. Second, its legitimacy was derived not from the Party or the state, but from the student body itself, and it consistently sought to implement democratic principles in its operations. Third, by its own definition, it maintained institutional independence from DISZ, the Party, and the government.

The thesis also highlighted that the establishment of MEFESZ did not constitute a reconstitution of the 1940s organizations of the same name; rather, the student organization was founded by university and college students within an entirely different context and with a distinct purpose.

3. What role did the university youth of Szeged—specifically MEFESZ—play in shaping the local events of the 1956 Revolution, and how did this integrate into the nationwide processes?

Prior to the revolution, university and college students in Szeged consistently played an initiatory role in shaping both local and national events. During the revolution itself, numerous students were positioned at the forefront of developments. Student representatives participated in the work of the Provisional Executive Committee of the Szeged Municipal Workers' Council, and subsequently in the Revolutionary National Committee. Furthermore, the university's national guard battalion performed law enforcement and public order duties within the city. Following the dissolution of DISZ (Union of Working Youth) in Szeged, MEFESZ became the sole prominent youth organization, extending its mobilization efforts into both secondary schools and industrial factories.

The national impact of MEFESZ is highly observable in the channeling and dissemination of student demands. Delegates from MEFESZ personally familiarized students at higher education institutions across the country with the demands formulated in Szeged. Radio Free Europe also reported on these developments. The assembly at the Budapest Technical University on October 22, which resolved to affiliate with MEFESZ, adopted demands that closely resonated with the Szeged points; it was also during this meeting that the concept for the October 23 demonstration, which ultimately culminated in the revolution, was conceived.

A significant portion of the demands formulated in Szeged came to fruition during the revolution, a fact that complicates the exclusively Budapest-centric interpretation of the 1956 events. While the students of Szeged took the initial step on the path leading to the revolution—effectively striking the spark that the Budapest students would subsequently fan into the flame of the uprising—the leading role during the freedom fight and the brief days of revolutionary victory no longer belonged to the university students or to MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students). Mortality statistics corroborate this shift, demonstrating that armed combat was predominantly sustained by manual laborers and young workers, whereas university students exerted their primary influence during the nascent phase of the revolutionary sequence by articulating early demands and organizing.

4. Through what means and by what rationale did the emerging Kádár regime dismantle the revolutionary university youth movements in Szeged between 1956 and 1958?

The liquidation did not occur in a single step but was realized through a protracted, multi-stage process. Its underlying logic was characterized by the parallel application of retaliation, organizational takeover, and the co-optation of selected groups. Although the new "worker-peasant" government distrusted MEFESZ (Association of Hungarian University and College Students), it did not dissolve the organization immediately. Instead, the established objective was to depoliticize MEFESZ and transform it into a party-controlled entity. Supported by the conscious efforts and backing of party organizations, and against a backdrop of continuous arrests, communist students loyal to the new regime gradually assumed control within the national leadership of MEFESZ. In March 1957, the KISZ (Hungarian Young Communist League) was officially launched at the University of Szeged, subsequently leading to the establishment of individual KISZ branches at both the Teacher Training College and the Medical University.

By the 1957/58 academic year, MEFESZ had ceased to exist, and KISZ became the sole legal youth organization operating in Hungarian higher education. The dissolution of MEFESZ and the establishment of KISZ brought about a fundamental transformation in institutional youth life. KISZ organized cultural and sports programs and exerted significant influence over numerous facets of university and college life, including the allocation of dormitory places and the determination of scholarships. While KISZ employed more sophisticated and indirect methods than its predecessor, DISZ (Union of Working Youth), it did not preserve MEFESZ's autonomous and democratic practices.

The new regime, however, sought to liquidate MEFESZ not only through administrative means but also concurrently deployed both formal and informal instruments of coercion. The paramilitary forces ("karhatalom") systematically harassed students and conducted house searches; furthermore, MEFESZ leaders and dissidents were arrested, while university officials—namely József Perbíró and Dezső Baróti—were sentenced in show trials. To escape retribution, numerous individuals fled abroad.

VI. Opportunities for Further Research

While this study has addressed several key questions, its specific focus on Szeged left numerous areas unexamined. These domains present viable opportunities for future investigation. Without claiming to be exhaustive, I highlight several potential research questions below.

The question arises as to the extent to which the development of university youth movements in Szeged can be considered typical or, conversely, exceptional compared with other regional higher education centers. As this dissertation focuses strictly on higher education in Szeged, it does not currently address the situation at other universities. Similarly, one might ponder whether the practice of retaliation followed the same pattern or varied across different institutions of higher education. Answering these questions, however, requires further fundamental research that is currently lacking.

It would be equally compelling to explore how the social background of the leaders and participants of the revolutionary youth movements in Szeged influenced their involvement in the revolution. This line of inquiry is particularly pertinent because, as demonstrated in this thesis, the Rákosi regime actively sought to establish new

channels of social mobility and cultivate a new, regime-loyal intelligentsia. At first glance, it may appear paradoxical that the very university youth who owed their opportunities for higher education, at least in a statistical sense, to the regime itself were the ones to rebel against it.

While this dissertation examines the predicament of higher education movements in Szeged up to the eradication of overt resistance and the establishment of the KISZ (Hungarian Young Communist League) monopoly, it would nonetheless be intriguing to observe whether less overt, covert practices of resistance persisted within Szeged's higher education. Finally, a further avenue of research is to investigate how perceptions of the 1956 role and movements of Szeged university youth evolved during the Kádár era and following the regime change.

VII. Author's Publications Related to the Topic of the Thesis

The following peer-reviewed scientific publications have been published in relation to the topic of the dissertation.

Haág Zalán István (2007): *Ifjúsági mozgalmak a szegedi felsőoktatási intézményekben 1957-1960.* In: Döbör, András; Kiss, Gábor Ferenc; Zakar, Péter (szerk.) Az 1956-os magyar szabadságharc és utóélete (1956-1990). Belvedere Meridionale, Szeged, 56-70.

Haág Zalán István (2017): „Magam előtt látom a rémült arcokat…": 1956. október 26., Szeged. *Belvedere Meridionale*, **29**. 1. sz. 127-130. doi: 10.14232/belv.2017.1.12

Haág Zalán István (2020): *Ifjúsági mozgalmak a szegedi felsőoktatásban az 1956-os forradalom előtt, alatt, után.* Tornyai János Múzeum és Közművelődési Központ – Emlékpont, Hódmezővásárhely.

Haág Zalán István (2025): Társadalmi mobilitás és felsőoktatás az 1950-es években. Opus et Educatio: Munka és Nevelés, **12.** 4. sz. 470-477. doi: 10.3311/ope.42424