

## Antifascism, the 1956 Revolution and the Politics of the Communist Autobiographies in Hungary 1944-2000

“I didn't use this word ‘liberation’ (*felszabadulás*), because in 1956 my life really changed. Everybody's lives went through a great change, but mine especially. ...I wasn't disgusted with myself that I had called the arrival of the Red Army in 1945 a liberation, but [after 1956] I didn't use it anymore.”

The above respondent came from a middle-class Jewish Budapest family. Members of his family had died in the Holocaust after the German occupation of the country in March 1944. He experienced the arrival of the Red Army as a ‘liberation’ from the threat of deportation, and joined the Communist movement immediately after the war. Until 1956 he had seen the world in antifascist terms; Fascism was considered to be the greatest evil, and Communists the most effective protectors of Hungary from its return. In the uprising of 1956, he had supported the reformed Communist forces fighting for a democratic socialism; following its suppression by Soviet tanks, he vowed to reject his earlier antifascist history: he revised his notion that the Soviets had liberated him in 1945 and now cast them as foreign occupiers. When faced with major political or social ruptures, individuals may be forced to rethink the meanings of their lives. Confronted with new political environments and public narratives about the past, individuals may be compelled to reconsider the stories they tell about their pasts (Ashplant, Dawson & Roper, 2000, pp.16-25; Portelli 2003, pp. 248-76; Mark 2005a; Dower 1996; Thomson 1998). Life stories that once seemed unproblematic might now become politically charged. Narratives that were once public taboos might be revived, and need to be reshaped, for public consumption. This article will address how one group – Communist party members who joined the movement immediately after World War Two and left after 1956 - experienced and reacted to three different political systems, and how their private and public autobiographies were moulded in response.

Between 1944 and 1948, the Communist parties of central-eastern Europe were transformed from politically marginal organisations to mass parties; in Hungary, party membership rose from an estimated 3000 to 887,000 (Hanley 2003, p.1076). Following the Communist takeover and the imposition of the Soviet Stalinist form of Communism, the liberal wing of the party became disillusioned. Their sentiments eventually found political expression in the reform national Communism of Imre Nagy's ‘New Course’. Many of those who had backed Nagy found themselves supporting, or involved in, the revolution of October 1956, which they viewed as a fight for democratic socialism against the Soviet-backed Stalinists in the party. Many of those who had identified with the uprising were either expelled or chose not to join the reconstituted party after 1956. Party membership collapsed after the uprising; it then recovered slowly but at no point before 1989 did it reach the levels of the early Communist period.

This generation found themselves living through three distinct political environments, in each of which different public narratives about the past were produced. These

official histories in turn related to, and made political demands on, these individuals' own lives. The early Communist state before 1956 presented history in terms of the antifascist struggle; the recent past was the story of an ongoing and constant battle between Communists and the forces of Fascism. After 1956, the Kádár state retained this antifascist historical narrative but added a new element: the 1956 uprising was understood as the latest clash with reactionary 'counter-revolutionaries' who were intent on restoring Fascism to Hungary. However, by the mid-1960s, as the Kádár regime attempted both to stabilise and politically demobilise Hungarian society, so politicised versions of the past were increasingly replaced with historical taboos and public silences, particularly over the events of 1956. Since the collapse of Communism, newly dominant voices have emerged, particularly from a nationalist conservative viewpoint. These have attempted to destroy the antifascist perspective on the past; Fascism and Communism, rather than being regarded as polar opposites, now have their similarities emphasised; both are demonised as periods of totalitarian dictatorship and of foreign occupation.

In each of these political periods, individuals from the post-war generation of party members have had to consider how to present their own pasts. In private, individuals' relationships with public narratives were determined *both* by their past experiences *and* their relationship with the new regime; where individuals supported power, they were often prepared to identify with its official histories in their descriptions of their own lives, regardless of their own actual past experiences. Yet when these party members were in opposition, even if their lives conformed to the descriptions of history propagated by the regime, they might choose to reject, or reshape, the telling of their own experiences to family or friends. In public too, they had to consider how far they wished to identify with public scripts; this was not merely determined by the level of support for the regime, but the extent to which the individual wished to be seen as politically acceptable in order to avoid discrimination or ensure social mobility (Markb 2005; Koleva 2001; Niethammer 1995; Valtchinova, 2000; Kotkin 1995; Hellbeck 2000 & 2001; Halfin 2003). This was particularly the case in the Communist period, where citizens had to produce *curricula vitae* which laid bare the their class position, and relationship to previous regimes and political events; individuals had to decide how far they wanted to identify with politically appropriate Communist histories in these exercises. For pre-1956 party members, Fascism, Red Army 'liberation' and the 1956 uprising have dominated their public and private autobiographical inventions and re-inventions; their understanding of each of these has altered significantly in different political contexts, and it is through the changing narration of these events that individuals revealed their complex and changing relationships with power.

This article uses personal testimony drawn from a broader oral history project, in which interviews were conducted with 78 members of the Budapest intelligentsia and middle-classes. Interviews covered a wide variety of topics such as attitudes towards the Communist state, resistance, social mobility and family life. Interviews were unstructured in the first half, but structured with a series of set questions in the second; this technique was adopted in order both to give respondents the greatest space to frame their lives in their own subjective terms, but also to ensure that a sufficient body of comparable material would be produced. The following analysis will focus on the testimony of the 13 party members who joined before 1956, and two close supporters of the regime, included in the sample. However, it will also draw on

the remainder of the material, in order to assess the image of the Communist party member amongst other social and political groupings. It will suggest that through the careful creation and analysis of oral history material, the multiple ways in which individuals have constructed their pasts can be uncovered. In some cases, interviewees self-consciously described how their understandings of their pasts had changed in response to political ruptures. In others, respondents gave different answers when asked the same question but in different historical contexts. In other instances, a respondent's contradictory stories suggested that an event had been recounted in various ways at different points in their life, but had not yet been fully integrated into a coherent narrative: analysing the points of inconsistency gave clear indications of the breaks in past interpretations of their lives.

### **1944-1956**

Antifascism emerged as a concept across Europe in the mid-1930s in response to the rise of Nazism. Many, who opposed the rise of Hitler, put aside other (seemingly less significant) political differences and defined themselves simply as antifascist. As such, antifascism became an ideology that was capable of uniting a wide swathe of the liberal-left (and some moderate conservatives); it became the ideological glue that held together disparate political movements in antifascist popular front democratic governments both before and after the Second World War (Eley 2002, pp.261-298; Rabinbach 1996, pp.3-4; Apor 2000). In the Eastern bloc, however, antifascism was used to justify the establishment of a Communist dictatorship after 1948. Communists conferred legitimacy on their regime by referring to (and in most cases, exaggerating) their role in the antifascist struggle – as partisans and in alliance with the Red Army – and bolstered their authority by claiming to be the best protectors of Hungary from the return of Fascism (Rév 2005, p.249). The assertion that Fascism needed to be kept at bay by the Communist regime was wielded repeatedly in defence of the increasingly violent excesses of the regime. Attacks on political opponents, show trials, deportations, and eventually the suppression of the supposed reactionary 'counter-revolution' of 1956 were all deemed necessary to protect Hungary from the return of Fascism. By 1989, therefore, antifascism was no longer remembered as a vibrant ideology that had unified the liberal-left against Fascism in defence of democracy, but rather as a worn-out rhetoric that had been used to justify dictatorship. When asked about antifascism in interviews in post-Communist Hungary, many had forgotten that it had had far more positive political connotations in the period before, during and immediately after the Second World War; antifascism was associated solely with the empty propaganda of the Communist state. Narrators of antifascist stories were not viewed sympathetically as victims of fascist atrocities, but rather were charged with opportunistically adopting the empty rhetoric of the Communist state for personal political advancement. Ernő, a staunch anti-Communist, did not believe the stories some individuals told about their liberation (*felszabadulás*) from Fascism; he refused to accept that they had genuinely suffered under Fascism or could possibly have welcomed the Red Army as liberators; rather this was the language of the self-interested grasping Communist functionary:

*James :*            *Did you say 'liberation' ('felszabadulás')?*

*Ernő:*            No (chuckles), for our acquaintances, whenever 'liberation' was mentioned, it was in inverted commas. We were 'liberated' from cars, we were

‘liberated’ from property, so this was the ‘liberation’.

*James:* So did you ever meet anybody who honestly said, ‘liberation’?

*Ernö:* (long pause) Well, I must say no, I must say no. (pause) Because all those who spoke openly about ‘liberation’, in fact had expressed quite different opinions only a few months before. For instance a friend of mine, we were together at a consulting company and we went sailing together with our families, and he was a member of our closest circle, and we all had the same political views. But suddenly he decided that he had greater ambitions, so then he joined the party and he changed his tone [i.e. starting using the term ‘liberation’]. He kept complaining about his small flat and in no time he found himself in a home in Roszadomb<sup>1</sup> and the same autumn his ‘peace bond’ was drawn and he got some 15, 000 forints which at that time, to give you an impression, was some fifteen times his monthly secretary and it was over two Wartburg cars, so it was a lot of money at that time.

Yet some in post-Communist Hungary, especially on the left, did not locate the roots of this antifascist ‘way of seeing’ in the experience of dictatorship but rather in their own ‘authentic’ experiences of Fascism and the Second World War. They emphasised that no matter how perverted this ideology had become, it once had an authentic core which predated the growth of the Communist party or the Communist takeover, and lay in the real experience of either suffering under, or the struggle against, the forces of Fascism. Mátyás, for example, charted how the suffering of his family as Jews under both the German occupation of Hungary and then the subsequent indigenous fascist Arrow Cross regime had led a very apolitical family to see themselves in political terms, and eventually had led him to career in the Communist party. Radicalised by the suffering caused by Fascism, Mátyás, as with many other Jews and those on the liberal-left, including non-Communists, searched for a form of politics that would prevent Fascism from returning. For some this meant support for the antifascist coalition of political parties (including moderate conservatives such as the Smallholders’ Party) which took power in 1945. Mátyás himself was attracted by the antifascist claims of the Communist party; hence he joined its youth movement MADISz as soon as the war was over. He emphasised that his antifascism was not invented after 1948 to ally himself with Communist ideology but was initially genuinely grounded in his personal experience of Fascism:

*Mátyás:* Now it’s a terribly politicised society (*rettenetesen átpolitizált társadalom*), and in the

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<sup>1</sup> An exclusive suburb in the Buda hills.

last forty to fifty years the community where I have lived...everything and everyone has been politicised. This is an abnormal society. Now in my childhood it wasn't like this, the war brought it... in normal circumstances a family doesn't talk about politics but about sport, food, where the boys are, women, cards...Now we were faced with a directly life threatening situation from 1943/4, and already, in this non-political and also non-politicised family, politics was becoming the main topic of conversation...so how the eastern front was moving...the family, as they were not Communists, they were afraid of the Russians, but at the same time they hoped for their victory... I remember March 19<sup>th</sup> and then the Szálasi putsch [the fascist Arrow Cross takeover] on October 15<sup>th</sup> really well. I don't just remember the events, I remember the psychological effects too...we were *liberated* on 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> February...I was already politicised and in the spring of 1945 I joined MADISz [the youth wing of the Communist party] of my own free will – nobody invited me. I wanted to, and that moment that I decided to join was based on a very simple experience. I read in a newspaper in Buda that MADISz were tearing down the signs from Hitler Square and Mussolini Square.<sup>2</sup> And then I thought, that's the place for me! And slowly life got back to normal, and I would have just become a normal student and I would have had a normal life, and I wouldn't have got closer to the Communist movement. Does a fifteen-year-old boy search for a political movement, if he lives in normal circumstances, if he doesn't live through a war and if his father hasn't died in that war?

It was not only Communists who remembered seeing the world in antifascist terms in 1945. Here Márton, who supported the Smallholders' Party in the immediate post-war elections, remembered that a wide range of people who had suffered, or struggled, or been in opposition under the Horthy system, the German occupation or the fascist Arrow Cross regime, had once seen the Red Army as liberators and had supported the post-war coalition as a defence against the return of Fascism or an ultra-conservative regime:

Márton: It was a liberation not just for Jews, but for the military deserters, who didn't want to fight alongside Hitler, for the illegal Communists, and

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<sup>2</sup> This occurred on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1945. Later in February, the Communist party suggested that Mussolini Square (Oktogon) should be renamed, 'Red Army Square'. This plan was never realised (Mevius 2005, p.200)

also for those who had suffered severely under Horthy's gendarmes...it was a liberation for everyone, who had really suffered under Hitler, or hated it, or did not agree with it. It meant the end of Hitlerism, it was a liberation from Hitler.

In 1945, antifascism was central to the political beliefs of many in Hungary (Apor, 2000); a wide swathe of political opinion considered the Horthy era a failure, Hungary's wartime alliance with Germany as an error, the German occupation and Arrow Cross as deeply destructive. Many embraced the Red Army as liberators, and supported the post-war 'antifascist' popular front which promised to protect Hungary from Fascism's return. István Bibó, writing in 1945, hoped that that the idea of antifascist liberation by the Red Army would remain in Hungary despite the fact that it occurred amongst the 'miseries of a lost war'. He argued that the success of democratic Hungary in the long-term depended on the active and continued rejection of Fascism and reactionary social forces:

One thing should be clear: It is *crucial* for Hungary that the fall of the old system remains or comes to be considered a *liberation*, and for the oppressive elements of the sick Hungarian social structure which disappeared with the arrival of the Red Army —the hunting aristocrats, the caste-bound officers and bureaucrats, the gendarmes, and the German-oriented "educators of nation" —to be prevented from returning. We must therefore make sure that, even if our memory forever connects liberation with the varied physical and human miseries of a lost war, the same liberation shall be made a pure and historical reality for our grandchildren because it ushered in *a long series* of developments with positive consequences. It is crucial for Hungary that the liberating achievement of the Soviet army not be forgotten but preserve its significance for Hungary's democratic development (Bibó 1991, p.91).

Yet, by the late 1940s, the antifascist way of viewing the world had become problematic. Many replaced their view of the Red Army as liberators with a characterisation of the Soviet army as an occupying force which helped establish a Communist dictatorship. Moreover, the use of antifascist rhetoric in Communist propaganda to legitimate their new regime tainted antifascist sentiments and weakened their association with the popular enthusiasm for the Red Army liberation from Fascism which had been felt immediately after the war. Csaba had supported 'bourgeois parties' such as the Smallholders' after 1945. He had seen the Red Army initially as his liberators, celebrated an end to Fascism and the 'reactionary' elements of Hungarian society, but wanted a multi-party liberal democracy. With the beginnings of Communist dictatorship, and the state's instrumentalisation of antifascist rhetoric, he found himself rejecting his own, and his friends' experiences of antifascism and the liberating Red Army:

James: *Did you meet anybody who thought that 1945 was a liberation?*

Csaba: Loads of people used to say it. ....they used to call these events a liberation. ....But in France there is an idea of liberation that remained after the war (*háború utáni felszabadulás*). Here there isn't, because they [the Communists] changed the street names to Liberation Boulevard and Liberation Square. They don't say this word 'liberation' now, because now it is connected with the Russians.

Many Hungarians thus abandoned antifascism; some continued using its terminology in public in order to ensure their education or employment under the Communist system, but from this point onwards most privately considered it to be an inauthentic way of seeing the world. Only those who supported the Communist state stuck with their antifascist life stories in public and private, instrumentalising them in different ways to express a variety of responses to the Communist state. They did not only parrot state narratives of the 'antifascist struggle' and 'liberation' in order to succeed in the party; alongside this purpose, antifascist narratives were also wielded as tools to express genuine ideological support for the regime, or even resistance to its excesses.

In the first instance, antifascist stories were retained because respondents had, at least in the first years of the regime, a faith in the ability of the Communist party to transform Hungary into a genuine antifascist democracy that would protect Hungary from the return of reactionary politics. Here Jenő described how he had joined the party at the point at which he felt post-war democracy was under threat from right-wing conspiracy:

Jenő: I sympathised with the Communist movement as an anti-Nazi movement before 1945. Because they were the most radical fighters against the war, against Nazi ambitions. But then immediately after 1945 I didn't identify with the movement, as they employed artificial nationalistic propaganda, and there were still others in the popular independence front I liked. At the same time I could see that their literature and culture was rather unsophisticated from a political point of view. I didn't like this, so I didn't join immediately, in contrast to many of my comrades...then later in 1947 when on one hand the Hungarian right-wing began to organise themselves once again in the so called 'conspiracy'<sup>3</sup>, and on the other had a very powerful voice in the 1947 election... So then in 1947 I decided to join the Communist party.

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to fears on the left, which were exaggerated by the Communists for political advantage, that the right were planning to undermine the fragile post-war democracy with an 'anti-republican conspiracy'. It was used by the Communists as a pretext to arrest the first secretary of the Smallholders' Party, Béla Kovács, in February 1947.

Ágota, who joined the party in 1951, continued to frame her world in antifascist terms after 1948, abandoning them only in 1956 when she concluded that the Communist state had betrayed its initial promise. Up until that point, she was happy to use antifascist vocabulary both at home and at work, as long as she believed that Communists were protecting Hungary from Fascism and ensuring a progressive transformation of the country (even if she was disillusioned at certain points). She had naturalised anti-fascism so completely that she did not recognise that many others did not call it a liberation after 1948; she believed that it was only ‘comrades of Szálasi’ (i.e. Fascists) who rejected this term:

*James: After 1948 did you use this word liberation?*

*Ágota: I used it, because everybody used it, and so really it became automatic. When I got my job, there we used it...the word simply meant that the Germans were defeated and all was well...*

*James: But many thought that this was not a liberation...*

*Ágota: They only changed their minds later – I could not believe that anyone, except for Fascists, wouldn’t feel that it was a liberation...Everybody, even my acquaintances, friends and my relatives who were sympathetic to Germany felt this, only later in 1956 when things degenerated [did this change]. Then and there everybody was glad about the victory over the Germans, except for those comrades of Szálasi.*

For some party members, enthusiastic support for the regime meant not only the continuation of antifascist stories but also their supplementation with new ones supplied by the Communist state. Miklós, for example, had joined the party in the early 1950s. He continued to narrate his experiences of suffering under Fascism and his liberation by the Soviets, now weaving these experiences into a much more complex antifascist narrative that must also have been the product of his political experiences as a party member. His story echoed much more closely later Communist versions of antifascism which did not just celebrate the struggle against the Arrow Cross, Nazi Germany and the Horthy system (a celebration which many non-Communists had also joined in 1945), but demonised all the Communists’ later enemies as Fascists, intent on destroying the Communist state, regardless of their actual ideology. Thus groups such as the Smallholders’ party (who were part of the antifascist collation after the war) or the revolutionaries of 1956 were also now demonised as anti-Semitic Fascists. The Communist state’s institutionalisation of antifascism had clearly given his experiences a home after 1948, but it had also given him lots of new material with which to construct a party loyalist’s antifascist account of his life. These ideas were still repeated in post-Communist testimony:

*James : So what were your attitudes towards the Communists?*



Miklós: Even if I had been in England, I would have been antifascist. And we thought that the Communist party were the best among the antifascists ... The Russians were fighting the Germans, they killed the Germans and they liberated us...But as I told you, I saw one rape, not a rape case, one girl came out, not even crying, [whispers in the girl's voice] 'Yes, yes, pardon me mummy, he made love to me. He was so young and even so so experienced'. She was an intelligent girl. And of course...the Jews in '56, the Fascists in Hungary accused the Jews of all being Communists...Because in the villages there were lots of pogroms and they killed the Jews because they thought they were on the side of the Communists...after the war I voted for the Smallholders', but later they became fascist.<sup>4</sup> It was a problem. The Smallholders'.....we felt that certain politicians in the past [who were fascist]...now they joined the Smallholders' Party. ... as I told you, I worked for the Russian army... and I had to write [signs] in Russian 'this street is examined and there are no mines'. In Russian...And I got food there. Lots of food. Because I worked there. There were many intelligent Russian officers as well. So not every Russian had blood on his hands. They were humans.

Many respondents realised after 1948 that their antifascist outlook, now institutionalised by the state, was being used on a everyday basis to judge access to education, the workplace and the party. To be on the right or wrong side of the antifascist struggle could determine one's access to university, promotion or financial support, or determine the level of discrimination one might suffer by the state. Producing politically appropriate curricula vitae was a vital skill for those wishing to avoid discrimination or fulfil their ambition. Party members, alongside all Communist citizens, had to learn how to fit their life stories into required Communist templates if they wished to be successful (Mark 2005b). This may explain some of the later polish of Communist party members' antifascist life stories: Miklós' insistence that he worked for the Red Army, and his explaining away of his Smallholders' party membership by claiming he left as soon they became 'fascist' may have been narrative echoes of the sort of stories he had to emphasise in order to construct a politically advantageous autobiography. Indeed, Miklós became the headmaster of a school at a very young age, a position that he would not have arrived in if he had not known how to present his past to the state in an acceptable fashion. Antifascist autobiographies might often have been maintained, or refined, in order to achieve ambitions in the early Communist period.

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<sup>4</sup> This was an echo of Communist propaganda in early 1947, when they accused the Smallholders' Party of helping to organise an 'anti-republican conspiracy' to undermine post-war democracy and impose a 'reactionary' social order.

Antifascist life stories were not only the products of support for, or ambition under, the Communist state; they could also be used to express resistance. Antifascism played a vital role in shaping the resistance against Stalinism, both in the lead-up and during the 1956 revolution. Many party members, by the early 1950s, had become disillusioned with the practice of the Stalinist state under Rákosi following the show trials, excessive violence against the regime's enemies, the rigidly imposed Stalinist economic model and the subordination of Hungarian national interests to those of the Soviet Union. Alajos, who was a close supporter of what would come to be known as 'reform socialism', charted this change in his life:

*James :*        *So can you remember how your opinion changed?*

*Alajos :*        ... between '48 and let's say '50-'51, I still kept a kind of open and very positive attitude towards the regime, and then, but already in '51 I decided that I would never join the Communist Party because, well, we went to a party meeting where an old social democrat was kicked out, and the circumstances was so humiliating and so disgusting and I thought, okay, that's out, I mean....but it was still a period ... if somebody asked me whether I was a socialist, I would say, I was a socialist, until about (pause) '52 or '53.

Despite growing dissatisfaction and horror at the practices of the state most, however, did not resist Stalinism until provided with a positive socialist alternative. Indeed, disillusionment with the Stalinist realities lead many to withdraw from the political sphere. Many were galvanised by into expressing resistance only when new hope for reform emerged after Stalin's death, and a new leadership in Moscow insisted that the Rákosi's Stalinist clique be replaced by a less hard-line government. In July 1953, a reformist leadership under Imre Nagy began their 'New Course', a programme which advocated a more flexible approach to the agricultural and industrial sectors, an end to the arbitrariness of political persecution and an attempt to gain a limited popular legitimacy (Rainer 1999). This revitalized many socialists' faith in the possibilities of Communism: Alajos found his views crystallising into this Nagy-led 'reform socialist mode'. Thus reinvigorated by the possibility of fighting for a more democratic form of Communism, these respondents were now prepared to resist the attempted re-imposition of hard-line Stalinism when Rákosi mounted a political comeback in spring 1955.

*Alajos :*        I almost had a split personality, until about mid-'53, when my views crystallised into a reform socialist mode, a sort of critical reformist attitude within the terms of socialism....And then 1953, after Imre Nagy's new programme, a lot of us, my generation, were quite enthusiastic about it, and when Rákosi and the Stalinists tried to come back in '55, then we weren't intimidated and spoke out

in various ways against it and tried to do something.

Reformist respondents described how from 1953, they were increasingly able to engage in open debates about Stalinism and its alternatives within the party. Alajos represented the clashes that occurred between reformists and Stalinists in his Marxist-Leninist seminars at university and illustrated his preparedness to criticise Stalinists who used antifascism in an unquestioning fashion to demonise their enemies in the West:

... So I was talking about these classes in Marxism-Leninism: there was this huge auditorium, and the man who spoke couldn't see the back where we were playing cards. They were such primitive lectures ... But one wouldn't argue with them. Sometimes, it happened once in a Marxist-Leninist exam that the examiners weren't quite sure whether I was right or not. .... And the question was whether – “What do you think – Is America becoming more fascist?”.... And I had just read in the party paper that the American high court actually ruled against segregation, and it was the first time they ruled against southern segregated states, and I said, no I don't believe it's getting more fascist, I mean, I've just read in the papers that there was a decision, in favour of blacks, so whoever says that, is ridiculous. Because you see, one of the Stalinist tenets was that the class war is getting sharper all the time, so if you had reformist thinking, you immediately challenged that view. And you'd say, “It can't be true, because there would have been a war, if the class war had come, there would have been a revolution, there would be war, it can't be true!”

Antifascism played a role in the articulation of differences between Stalinists and reform Communists. Alajos highlighted how, in Marxist-Leninist seminars, Stalinists had appealed to an overly politicised unrealistic, 'inauthentic' antifascism. They always needed to invent new fascist enemies, or present the conflict between Fascists and their enemies in ever sharper terms, regardless of present realities, in order to justify their own power. This perceived abuse of the memory of the antifascist struggle did not lead reformists to reject it as a world-view; rather they appealed to their own separate memory of it in order to attack Stalinism.

Alajos remembered using antifascist rhetoric against the state in his protests in 1956. He had found himself involved in the demonstration which followed the reburial of Rajk on 6 October 1956. László Rajk, who had been the Communist Interior minister, was sentenced at a show trial on trumped-up charges of Trotskyism and espionage in the summer of 1949 and later executed; his death became a symbol for the perversions of Stalinism and his reburial thus became a magnet for reform Communists. Alajos

recalled transforming the meaning of old antifascist slogans, and a well-known antifascist poem, into attacks on Stalinists:

Alajos : on 6 October 1956 you had the Rajk Reburial...when I was coming out after the speeches...I saw a little group with a flag and they were sort of beckoning to me to join in. I joined in, and then I found somebody...a bloke I knew from the *Széchenyi* library who said, 'Somebody told me there's going to be a demonstration'. 'Where are you going to?' 'Oh, we're going to *Hősök Tere* [Heroes' Square], and then to the *Batthyány Örökmécses*.' This is a flame in memory of Lajos Batthyány who was the Prime Minister of Hungary in 1849, and was executed.<sup>5</sup> This is a kind of place where people go, sort of a 'Martyrs' Corner'. All right, so I joined the group. It wasn't particularly political, but we started producing slogans together...between 1945 and 1948, the Communist party slogan was: 'We're not going to stop half-way. Let reaction perish!' So we adapted this slogan, instead of saying 'reaction' saying 'Stalinism', so 'We are not going to stop half-way. Let Stalinism perish!' And then we shouted over and over, two hundred people, as we marched with this flag, and people looked at us, and they didn't understand what was going on...I read out a poem by Atilla József,<sup>6</sup> which was antifascist, rather anti-German, and was a patriotic poem ending with the words, 'So that we shouldn't be a German colony', but I read, 'So we shouldn't be a foreign colony'.

Alajos had seen himself as part of the antifascist tradition which had struggled against Nazism and 'reaction' in the immediate post-war period; he believed that this gave him the right to resist Stalinism. By using the antifascist themes of fighting against occupation, political extremism and violent dictatorship, reformists thus turned its language back against the excesses of the Stalinist state. In this way, antifascism could be employed to express resistance to the state.

Most respondents viewed the 1956 uprising as part of their struggle against the Stalinists in the party, and as an attempt to replace a corrupted state with a democratic socialist state which held to antifascist ideals. Benedek produced revolutionary leaflets in Russian and distributed them to the first wave of Soviet tanks as they

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<sup>5</sup> An 'eternal flame' was constructed by Hungarian nationalists in 1926 to the memory of Lajos Batthyány, who was executed as prime minister of Hungary during the war for independence against Austria in 1848-9

<sup>6</sup> A poet and journalist who joined the Communist party in 1930. He was soon expelled, committed suicide in 1937, but his work was later appropriated by the Communist state.

arrived in Budapest. Worried that the soldiers might view the insurgents as Fascists intent on destroying Communism, he sought to reclaim antifascism for the revolutionaries, by explaining to the Russians that they were sincere antifascists, who merely wanted a more humane form of socialism. His involvement in 1956 revealed the extent to which he continued to view the world in antifascist terms: he viewed the those others in the revolution who were fighting to restore capitalism as ‘unrealistic’ Fascists:

Benedek: The '56 revolution was just about which of the left-wing options we take. There was no-one, except for a few, unrealistic people, who were dreaming of restoring capitalism, but the revolution of all those who took part was always just about which of the various possibilities of socialism we take... We decided that we would try to explain to the Russian soldiers who we were; that we were not Fascists trying to re-establish capitalism or Nazism or anything like that. So we wrote a one-page leaflet in Russian and took it to the university printing press, where I had a friend, a printer friend, and he printed it for me, and then with other friends in my circle, we went around in the whole of Budapest and climbed up on the tanks and handed the soldiers these leaflets. It said that we wanted democratic socialism, not capitalism, and we want equality between nations, of friendship with the Russian nation on basis of equality... this was the first day of the revolution... so the leaflet was quite a mild document if you like. We didn't dream of leaving the Warsaw Pact.

The growth of the antifascist life story did not reflect, as it is frequently imagined in post-Communist Hungary, the preparedness of Communist functionaries to invent antifascist pasts in order to succeed within the political system. Ambition under Communism was only one root of the this story. For many, antifascism had genuine pre-Communist roots in their experiences of Fascism during World War Two. After 1948, antifascist narratives were used by party members to express range of relationships with the Communist state; these included not only support and ambition, but also resistance. However, faced with the defeat of their attempt to reform socialism in the revolution of October 1956, and their alienation from the party and state which followed it, many respondents no longer wanted a politically engaged life. Neither wanting to express support or resistance towards the new post-1956 state, their antifascist life stories no longer had a reason to exist: new ways of seeing the world, and framing of their lives, began to develop.

### **1956-1989**

In the aftermath of the defeat of the 1956 revolution, the reconstituted state under Kádár pronounced the events of October to have been a ‘counter-revolution’ organised by Fascists to undermine Communist rule. They exaggerated and

caricatured the presence of the radical right and conservative Catholic wings of the revolution in order to characterise the entire uprising as an attempt to restore Fascism to Hungary (Berecz, 1986); the existence of other political tendencies – reformed socialist and national-democratic – was ignored. Thus those reformed Communists who were involved in the revolution now found themselves demonised as counter-revolutionary Fascists. This remained the official version of the 1956 until the late 1980s; the uprising was the last in a long series of attempts by Fascists to take power in Hungary (Rév 2000; Ripp 2002).

Those respondents who rejoined, or supported, the reconstituted party after 1956 still produced ‘counter-revolutionary’ accounts even in a post-Communist context.<sup>7</sup> Judit came from a Jewish family and had joined the party in 1945 aged thirteen (lying about her date of birth). She had left in 1954, had wanted to re-join after 1956, but felt unable actively to contribute to the party, because of her domestic responsibilities. Her husband had rejoined after 1956 (and remained in the party until the 1980s). She wrote her own family experiences of the uprising into the Kádárist interpretation of the 1956 revolution. Her family had suffered anti-Semitic abuse during the revolution; she used these experiences in order to characterise those involved in the uprising as Fascists, and to explain why she welcomed the arrival of Soviet tanks. The framing of her own experiences at the hands of so-called ‘counter-revolutionaries’ was a product of her support for the Kádár state:

*James :*            *So before 1956, were you often afraid?*

*Judit :*            I don't remember [being afraid]. But on October 23rd '56, the first day, my mother was working near the Stalin statue and she came home by foot. On the first day she was attacked on the street as a Jew. There came a group and they spat on my mother, saying, ‘you ugly Jew!’ And after that we were glad we were living near to the Russian embassy, on Bajza Utca and that Russian tanks were there, because an anti-Semitic movement was taking shape underground ... We felt more secure with the Russians. But is an absolutely Jewish point of view. Absolutely. I don't know whether the others felt the same but... Hearsay. That the Fascists are moving against the Jews again...But a lot of Jews left the country [in the emigration during and after the 1956 uprising], not only because of Communism, but also because they were afraid that something could begin again.

*James :*            *Most people say the opposite about the Russian tanks.*

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<sup>7</sup> On the social memory of the revolution, more research has been done on younger generations’ response to the uprising; on the children of those executed and caught up in the reprisals (Körösi & Molnár 2003) and on ‘third-generation’ post-Communist teenagers (Szalai & Gábor 1997, pp.26-50).

Judit: Yes, I can imagine. I know. It is my personal view.

*James:* So can you remember what you thought when the Russian tanks came in?

Judit: It's a difficult question to answer. My feeling was that we were more secure, but I don't know how to explain it after so many years.

*James:* ... What did you say about '56 itself?

Judit: You know, nowadays, people say that they were heroes in '56, when I know for certain that they were nothing, they had nothing to do with '56. It was the very same thing that after the war, in Hungary, loads of people claimed to be partisans. But during the war there weren't really any. And it is the very same thing. Nowadays they are saying they are heroes of '56, when there were not so many of them.

The experience of the uprising did not challenge Judit's antifascist framing of her life story. Her family had been saved from the Holocaust by the Red Army and Soviet tanks were rescuing her once again from a Fascist attack in 1956. Her experience of the suppression of the revolution confirmed her belief in the Communists as antifascists and the Russians as her liberators. The story of 1956 was placed right at the centre of her life story in the Kádár period; her support for the new regime was based on her memory of being saved from renewed persecution.

Many did not re-join the Communist movement after 1956. Membership of the party, which had stood at 859,037 in January 1956 before the revolution (Rákosi 1974, pp. 224-5), fell to 151,000 in its immediate aftermath and had only risen to 416,646 by 1959 (Szenes 1976, pp.249-50). It was only in the 1980s that party membership began to approach pre-1956 levels (Hanley 2003, p.1076). Many respondents presented the debates which surrounded their decisions not to rejoin. Mátyás had been a reform Communist, identified with Imre Nagy, had supported the revolution and was dismayed by its collapse. His decision not to rejoin was a moral one: he now saw the party as inauthentic as it had crushed its own supporters. He caricatured the reconstituted party as a broken organisation with an ideologically inauthentic membership:

*James :* Did you think of rejoining the party?

Mátyás: After 1956, it wasn't any kind of temptation at all, because by the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1956 the situation had been resolved morally; we were only really thinking about whether to stay in Hungary or to emigrate. But not to join the party was, for my wife and my friends, a completely clear moral

imperative, we had no doubts about it...there were many who joined and many who didn't. Some joined because they thought it was a counter-revolution, or because they were true believers (*meggyőződéses kommunisták*). And some thought that they had to join the party because there was no other possibility of ensuring their survival...it really pulled apart our community where I lived, us young Budapest left-wing intellectuals. Still, there were those, who up until 1956 had not been party members, and in 1957 everyone joined the party, because at that point the party had collapsed, and they thought that here was the opportunity to join and make their careers. There was a concrete example, a very unpleasant monk, who had never been in the party, and when they reconstituted the party he immediately joined, because no kind of conditions were set.

Respondents who supported the Kádár state, such as Judit, found their pre-1956 antifascist stories confirmed by the experience of the uprising. However, for respondents such as Mátyás above, who broke with the party after the defeat of the uprising, and viewed the Kádár state as a bastardised inauthentic Communism, their antifascist life stories were thrown into crisis. They were faced with a state that called their attempt to reform socialism a counter-revolution, the suppression of the revolution the 'second liberation of Hungary' and found themselves demonised as Fascists. This change in the public narrative provoked a crisis in his private understanding of antifascism; no longer able to support the state, seeing left-wing colleagues violently treated, and even executed, for Fascist 'counter-revolutionary' activities, he began to question whether the antifascist framing of his life up until this point had been a sham. Despite having been saved from extermination as a Jew by the Red Army in early 1945, he started to wonder whether he had in fact been liberated by their arrival. The experience of a bastardised official antifascist narrative after 1956 therefore provoked many to question or abandon the antifascist stories through which they had made sense of their lives before 1956:

*James:*            *Did you use this word 'liberation'?*

*Mátyás:*            Naturally, absolutely. It was an everyday saying, that 1945 was a liberation. There wasn't another word other than liberation for it in 1944-5.

*James:*            *How have you used the word 'liberation' since the collapse of Communism?*

...already [in 1956] it became a confusing word as the consequence of the so-called Liberation was the destruction of the 1956 revolution...when the propaganda started on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1956 that the destruction of the revolution was the 'second



Liberation of Hungary' – and I'm not exaggerating here - from that second onwards I didn't consider 1945 a liberation anymore. Because in that second, in 1956, we woke up the fact that the Soviets were attacking the city and we didn't feel that they were liberating troops anymore. It is complicated. Or it is very simple. Probably both. At Christmas 1944 when the Russians came and saved my and my mother's lives, was it not a liberation? What the hell was it, if it wasn't a liberation? That's all. I don't have anything more to say about it.

Before 1956, antifascism had been used to express both support and resistance to the state. As Mátyás' testimony above suggests, ex-party members' alienation from the state meant that they were not prepared to deploy their antifascist stories in order to identify with the state anymore. However, there were alternative readings of antifascism which might have been deployed in the service of resistance to the Kádár regime. During the revolution itself, reformist party members had seen themselves as the authentic antifascists who had once opposed Hitlerism in order to ensure a democratic political order, and were now fighting against the Stalinist perversion of antifascism in order to establish a reformed, more humane and democratic socialism. This alternative reading of antifascism had inspired resistance before and during the 1956 uprising; in the period immediately after the revolution some respondents still sought to recall an alternative version of socialism that could be fought for: their memory of 1956 as a heroic struggle suggested the possibility of continued resistance against an inauthentic state:

*James :*            *Directly after the revolution, what was your opinion of Kádár?*

*Jenő :*            Bad...it was the worst possible, I hated the Kádár system, because they compromised socialist principles, because they forced a new socialist system onto people with tanks. We regarded it as a catastrophe. From that perspective we considered it to be the greatest misfortune, that socialist theories, principles, had been compromised.

However, as the opportunities and desire for resistance declined under the Kádár regime, so did the antifascist versions of history that had once framed and justified it. The retribution which followed the revolution convinced many that resistance against the re-established Kádár state was futile, and that the newly reconstituted Communist state was incapable of being reformed. Between 1957 and 1963, around 350 revolutionaries were executed and 22,000 sentenced for their involvement in the revolution; overall, it is estimated that over 100,000 were affected to some degree by the post-1956 reprisals (Litván 1996, pp.143-4). Alongside armed youths who fought in street battles, and members of workers' councils set up during and after the revolution, the left-wing intelligentsia interviewed in this project suffered disproportionately compared to the population as a whole (Litván 1996, pp.144-6).

For these ex-party members, 1956 increasingly represented the futility of resistance, the tragedy of the reprisals, and the end of their aspirations for reformed socialism. In this quote, Imre rejected the portrayal of the revolution as a heroic fight; rather, by the 1960s, he saw it as an ‘unwanted revolution’, which had radicalised the state into violence against the reformers, and had in fact destroyed the possibility of a reformed ideologically authentic Communist state. For him, the memory of 1956 did not act as a call for resistance but rather was an illustration of the pointlessness of opposition. This new memory of 1956 – as an unwanted destructive event - was thus increasingly being used to justify a withdrawal from active political engagement with, and resistance against, the Kádár state. He remembered that this attitude was particularly prevalent within his circle in 1968, when debates about the pointlessness of resistance were revived in the wake of the failures of Czech reformers in the Prague Spring:

*James :*            *A simple question. Why did you want to take part in the revolution?*

*Imre:*            I didn’t want to take part in the revolution. The revolution came upon us, it was a spontaneous revolution. Even the devil wouldn’t have wanted a revolution, we wanted reform, but without an armed uprising. And on October 23<sup>rd</sup> when the revolution spontaneously broke out, you had to decide, whether to stand with the revolution or not. And it was the opinion of my circle of friends that we had to stand with the revolutionaries, and in the course of the revolution we had to solve the economic problems of the country. So already then there was no going back.

*James:*            *How did this feeling develop?*

*Imre:*            Firstly, this feeling was a question of moral and political development: our knowledge of what had happened in the west, and of western democracy, got stronger, and at the same time our knowledge of the awful things that had happened in the Soviet Union also developed. And in 1968, there were the Czech reforms which *didn’t* lead to an armed uprising, but were put down in the same brutal way, as the Hungarians had been in 1956. So at that time we had debates with lots of people about why the Soviet bloc wasn’t able to manage to take another course. It was because reform had been strangled by the armed uprising, it had been strangled by the *Köztársaság* Square lynchings<sup>8</sup>, and Imre Nagy taking Hungary out of the Warsaw

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<sup>8</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> October 1956, an armed assault on the party’s headquarters on *Köztársaság* Square led to lynchings and the deaths of twenty-four people who were guarding the building; after 1956, the state presented these victims as martyrs at the hands of Fascists: this story became one of the main propaganda tools used to establish the idea of counter-revolution (Rév 2005, p.215)

Pact. The suppression of the Czech reforms confirmed my view of 1956.

The revolution and its aftermath had thus destroyed their antifascist framing of their lives. They could neither identify with the Kádár-era version of antifascism which had demonised them as ‘counter-revolutionary’ Fascists, nor, after the experience of the post-revolutionary reprisals, did they wish to resist the state. Thus antifascism, which had previously been central to the dialogue between party member and state, no longer had relevance to their lives: they no longer wished to engage politically either as supporters or resisters.

Respondents revealed how their withdrawal from political engagement developed through the 1960s. The very politicised accounts of their lives between 1944 and 1958 suddenly disappeared from their life narratives; stories of persecution under Fascism, revolution in 1956 and repression suddenly gave way to descriptions of career and family:

*James:*            *What happened later [after the revolution]?*

*Károly:*            I was arrested 10-12 days after I was initially set free, then in 1957 they let me out again...when they took me and then released me, with a friend’s help I managed to get a one-room flat in Újpest which didn’t have a toilet or bathroom, had water only in the courtyard, but nevertheless was an apartment. We began to live there, there our fourth child was born, the slowly things settled down and I became a deputy director in 1965. That was the period of consolidation in Hungary, and in 1971 I became the director... then things were getting back to normal.

Respondents described the two processes that led them to withdraw politically. Firstly, the experience of retribution had convinced many that they could neither support the state nor was there any point resisting it; hence they decided to withdraw from a political life. Secondly, the policies of the Kádár state which followed the period of retribution from 1962 onwards – in the so-called ‘consolidation period’ – offered individuals who had fought in 1956 the possibility of re-integration, if they were prepared to refrain from further political opposition. From 1962, the Communist state ended the open persecution of so-called ‘counter-revolutionaries’; in August of that year the party’s central committee resolved to terminate political trials for involvement in the uprising. Many of those sentenced in 1957-8 were amnestied in 1963. Moreover, those who had initially opposed the Kádár state were now not merely tolerated on the social margins, but actively encouraged to re-integrate into society as long as they remained apolitical.<sup>9</sup> In December 1961, Kádár famously declared that, “he who is not against us is with us and welcomed by us”. After the ‘great amnesty’ of 1963 for those sentenced in 1957-8, the children of ‘56-ers were

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<sup>9</sup> From this point many members of the intelligentsia and old middle classes (from whom this sample of party members is taken) began to recover the social position they had lost in the early Communist period (Rainer 2005, pp.66-7; Valuch 2001, p.99; Gáti & Horváth, 1992).

increasingly allowed back into education (although their exclusion from tertiary education declined much more slowly) (Kőrösi & Molnár 2003, pp. 64-5). Nearly all respondents accepted this offer to re-integrate on the condition that they withdrew from the political sphere. It was not considered a betrayal of their earlier political lives; rather, it paralleled their own attempts to depoliticise themselves after the defeat of the revolution.<sup>10</sup>

These respondents were now living politically withdrawn lives; the protection of their careers and the private sphere from outside interference replaced a political dialogue with the Communist state as their central concern. Some decided to 'tame' their political pasts; they neither wanted to politicise their children through the memory of antifascism or resistance, nor did they want their former political pasts to impact on their careers.<sup>11</sup> Kádár-era autobiographies were often designed in order to insulate the individual and their family from politics and to ensure a prosperous apolitical life. Indeed, any manipulation of their pasts was acceptable as long as it protected the private sphere. Some, for example, chose to silence, or depoliticise, their political life stories in the private sphere, whilst continuing to use antifascist life stories in public, in order to safeguard their careers or avoid discrimination.<sup>12</sup>

Károly had set up a new reformed socialist party in his locality in October 1956, had contact with Imre Nagy, had been faced with execution but had been spared. Despite this earlier revolutionary life, he was silent about 1956 wherever this was possible: he claimed only to have talked about it once in the entire Kádár period. His children had been aware that their father had been under political surveillance. Not wanting to radicalise them, however, he refrained from telling them about what had happened to him until the late 1980s :

*James :*            *Did you talk later with your family or friends about 1956?*

*Károly:*            There was a classmate of mine who I had graduated with and we were on especially good terms with, and in 1963 – by that time I was already 37 - we went out for a two-day walking holiday, and there I told him everything. He listened with dismay – he was the first [I told]... Otherwise I never really brought it up.

No, it was an interesting thing, at just about the time when the system changed [in 1989], my children reproached me, that they had never known anything about what had happened to me, it was not a subject we had discussed at home.

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<sup>10</sup> Some scholars of memory have explored social complicity in the process of official silencing (Passerini 2003, pp.242-44; Young 2002).

<sup>11</sup> For explorations of collective silencing (György 2000; Gyáni 2001, Ripp 2002; Kőrösi and Molnár 2003, p. 2)

<sup>12</sup> Silencing of the past was not a feature of all respondents' testimony; however, nearly all respondents took care to protect their social position from the intrusion of past political actions.

When I was set free from the prison, for years a car stood outside my home every night...even with this going on we never talked about it, but they were small children. Even much later it wasn't a subject for discussion - even when things settled down [in the 1970s] - my children always knew there was something, but it was not a subject for discussion. Then in 1987/88, when they were already adults, and had families, then they asked what was what.

When he could not avoid dealing with 1956, he devised strategies to minimise the impact that his past would have on his family. He formulated a twin policy of silence at home and openness at work; he would not use the term revolution at home for fear that his children would start using the word and incriminate themselves; at work, by contrast, he was open about his active revolutionary role in *curricula vitae* which he filled out for employment and promotion; by being honest about his past he hoped to appear to be demonstrating sufficient obedience to avoid further retribution:

*James :*            *What was your opinion of this phrase, 'counter-revolution'?*

*Károly:*            I never used it, it was a very delicate issue. When I spoke I always said the 'October events' (*október események*), or the 'events of 1956'. I didn't use the term revolution, I wouldn't have dared, because they kicked those sort of people out, but I never referred to it as a counter-revolution... It was a kind of compromise [to use this term, the 'October events'], but it meant my past never affected my children. I never put them in the position where they could be provoked [i.e. into saying something politically problematic]..., officially I wrote about my role [in 1956] everywhere I had to, so they [the state] knew about me, because I wrote it in my autobiography, what had happened, because I didn't want the facts coming out from elsewhere.

Similar pressures to protect one's present from one's history also shaped the new ways in which the stories of Red Army liberation were told. Before 1956 their use of liberation stories in *both private and public* was illustrative of their identification with the state. By the mid-1960s, however, some respondents were merely manipulating liberation stories wherever necessary in order to ensure that family and career were protected from outside intrusions. In private, most had abandoned the idea, following their political alienation from the regime. Despite this, they continued to use it in public to maintain their careers:

*James:*            *When did the use of the word 'liberation' change?*

Ágota: For me, after 1956 it slowly began to change, because my husband in 1955 had already been chucked out [of the party]...myself, I was already calling it a *megszállás* (occupation).

James: *Did you use it after 1956?*

Ágota: In teaching absolutely, if I wanted to keep my job. It was that kind of word like 'table' or 'drink'- it was one word that meant, that here the Russians had defeated the Germans. But for me the word no longer had any political content – this is still true today.

After 1989, this preparedness to manipulate one's life story in public was seen as a sign of a collaborator. However, for these individuals, this issue was not discussed in moral terms; it was neither seen as a form of compromise, nor as a betrayal of their older political struggles. Respondents did not view these historical revisions as morally problematic both because they saw themselves as politically (and thus morally) disengaged, and because the state itself did not force them over certain moral boundaries. Although they had to deploy liberation stories in public, despite rejecting them in private, this was not seen as a compromise. Rather, because the idea of the antifascist struggle and liberation had become meaningless, it could be publicly stated without implying that one was in league with the State or was accepting its version of the past. It was simply the banal iteration of politically empty terms. In the above quote, Ágota described how she now categorised the term '*felszabadulás*/ liberation' to be a word such as 'drink' or 'table' – it had no political content for her anymore. The fact that she could use it so easily and not find this morally problematic indicated, for her, the extent of the political distance she had put between herself and the regime. As such, some considered the ease with which they themselves had deployed antifascist slogans unproblematically to be an expression of resistance, not of compromise. It signalled that they now inhabited an entirely different moral world and had completely rejected the antifascist universe in which the Communist state operated.

Many also recognised that the state, wanting to re-integrate them, had not pushed them into making some difficult or impossible moral compromises. The Kádár regime had made nuanced judgements about their citizens' moral boundaries, and did not force them to step over them in their public biographies; whilst requiring the use of terms such as 'liberation', more recent politically-charged terms such as 'counter-revolution' did not need to be iterated in public. Indeed, increasingly from 1963 onwards, the Kádár regime used the term 'counter-revolution' less and less in public, although it remained the official state history. Rather than refer to the events of the revolution itself, they increasingly demonised the revolution by referring back to their own condemnation of the uprising; this tactic allowed the regime to propagate its official position on the events of 1956 without publicly discussing the events themselves, which they feared might evoke a political reaction (Gyáni 2006).<sup>13</sup> Only

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<sup>13</sup> This practice of referring to the suppression of the 'counter-revolution' indirectly also explains the absence of a memorial to the 'Soviet heroes' of 1956 in the Kádár period. Commemorations of the 'counter-revolution' were held every November 4<sup>th</sup> at the World War Two monument that celebrated

in the 1980s was the idea of counter-revolution aggressively re-asserted (Ripp 2002, pp.240-5). Csaba explained how this distinction between the 'official use' of 'counter-revolution' on one hand, and the everyday ways of describing 1956 on the other which were in fact tolerated from ordinary citizens and preferred by Kádár's supporters too:

*James:*            *Did you talk with your friends about 1956?*

*Csaba:*            Yes, we all expressed the same opinion. For example, the party had a concept after 1956 of 'counter-revolution', which meant that it was all the bourgeoisie, Fascists, the West, reaction; then there was 'revolution', that meant the socialists. Now, I never uttered the word, 'counter-revolution', I didn't say it once after 1956, but it was possible to use the term the '56 events' in everyday speech. And all Hungarians understood what was meant. Nobody really ever said, 'counter-revolution', that was just the official term. Neither did they say, 'revolution', that was forbidden. They didn't want to say revolution and they [the regime's supporters] only said counter-revolution within their families, but not openly. They said 'the events of '56' too. This was the politically cautious waffle (*óvatos mellébeszélés*) that they used.

Before 1956, antifascist life stories had been central to respondents' engagement with the state; by the mid-1960s, they had purged their lives of political meaning in order to sustain and justify a politically withdrawn existence. Not wanting to politically engage with a state that still employed antifascist rhetoric as its official discourse, many purged their private autobiographies of politicised stories of the antifascist struggle and liberation. The reconstruction of their life stories after 1956 was not moulded by new political concerns, but rather the wish to live a privatised, withdrawn, apolitical life. With their gradual re-integration into Communist society after 1963 respondents were prepared to manipulate their autobiographies in any way that ensured the protection of the private sphere from political intervention, even if this meant sacrificing the memories of involvement in 1956 or still repeating empty antifascist rhetoric in public where it was necessary to protect one's career. Many did not view these autobiographical manipulations as moral compromises or as a betrayal of the political struggles of their earlier lives, however. Indeed it was a symbol of the completeness of their personal depoliticisation and an indication of the extent of distance between themselves and the regime that they were so easily able to sacrifice the authenticity of their old political pasts in the empty spouting of state rhetoric. However, this was not how these manipulations were viewed after 1989; the stereotype of the careerist collaborating functionary who would sacrifice their own past for individual gain was to have a major impact of the way ex-party members

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liberation from Fascism instead. This compromise allowed 'counter-revolutionaries' to be associated with Nazis, but ensured that the actual role of the Soviets in 1956 could be glossed over (Rév. 2005 , p.194).

were viewed, and the ways they had to reshape their autobiographies, in the post-Communist period.

### **After 1989**

The collapse of Communism in 1989 ushered in significant changes in the way in which ex-Communist party members related their life stories. Many presented themselves as finally being able to tell stories about their pasts which had until then been taboo both in the home and in public. Stories about 1956 which had been repressed by the Kádár state could finally be articulated; stories of liberation and suffering under Fascism that had been co-opted by the Communist state could now be reclaimed, free from their previous associations with propaganda. Central to their new self-presentation was the idea of 'truth-telling' about a once suppressed past.

Whilst it is certainly the case that many suppressed stories did emerge, we should not take this claim to truth-telling at face value. On one hand, the idea of truth telling is frequently central to personal self-legitimation under any political system; to claim that one is recounting 'historical realities' which were previously unacceptable can add authenticity to one's account of the past, and can often be used as a claim to social status in the present. This can be particularly powerful in post-dictatorial democratic systems, which claim to place a high value on ideals such as free speech. On the other hand, it was clear from respondents' testimony that the revival of certain political stories did not represent a simple resurgence of past experiences, unmediated by contemporary context. Their re-telling occurred in a very politicised environment; and narratives were shaped by new debates about the nature of Communism and the role of party members. Refashioning their life histories to deal with new approaches to the past was as important under post-Communism (Fitzpatrick, 2005) as it had been before 1956 or under the Kádár state.

In 1989, aspects of their older antifascist life stories returned. They presented themselves as idealists radicalised by their suffering, or the suffering of others, under Fascism, who had been attracted to the Communist state out of sincere ideological conviction and the desire to contribute to the construction of a more progressive Hungary, who had been prepared to resist the power of the Communist state when it betrayed its initial promise, and who had suffered disproportionately after 1956 for their attempts to reform the Communist state.<sup>14</sup> They contrasted themselves with those who joined the party *after* 1956, who they often considered to be non-ideological individualistic careerists. Many believed that their combination of experiences - their suffering under Fascism and Communism, their idealism (rather than careerism) and their preparedness to resist a degraded dictatorship would provide an acceptable account of their lives to a post-Communist audience. They wanted to demonstrate that there was an alternative and genuine antifascism, distinct from the Stalinist and Kádárist corruptions of the movement, which they considered to contain moral and political legacies worth preserving in the post-Communist period. However, they soon discovered that many did not accept the historical foundations upon which this supposedly moral account was based. Antifascism remained, after 1989, closely associated with the propagandistic rhetoric of the Communist regime. Moreover, newly dominant conservative historical scripts were attacking the entire edifice of

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<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that all had morally pure life stories; rather that they believed their experiences could acceptably be turned into such a story.



antifascism, destroying not only the Communist version of history but also the alternative antifascism through which respondents understood their lives and sought to be judged.

The conservative historical accounts prevalent after 1989 demolished the historical context in which antifascism made sense. It both dislodged Fascism as the central defining evil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (replacing it with Communism) and removed the binary opposition between Fascism and Communism that was central to the antifascist framing of the world; rather, Fascism and Communism became viewed as very similar ideologies. Under the first conservative post-Communist government (1990-4), the memory of Fascism was sidelined in the celebration of the pre-Communist period: the new government idealised pre-1945 conservative bourgeois Hungary under Horthy for its social stability, its maintenance of national traditions and its anti-Communism (Rév 2005, pp.43-4).<sup>15</sup> The Red Army and Soviets were demonised for destroying it. This interpretation marginalised the memory of the indigenous Fascist state which had come between the Horthy era and the arrival of the Soviets. It also ignored the antecedents of Fascism, and the Holocaust, which lay earlier in the Horthy period; it preferred to present the aspects of Horthy's rule which held the Holocaust at bay, rather than those which facilitated it.<sup>16</sup> In downplaying the memory of Fascism and the Holocaust, this new historical narrative stripped the Red Army of any liberationist credentials, and divested the Communist party members' political radicalisation of any meaning or ideological justification. These early post-Communist interpretations of history were often reproduced in conservatives' testimony: Fascism was of little consequence, and the Red Army were solely destroyers. Hence anyone who used the rhetoric of antifascism and liberation must have been a Communist stooge who later invented a politically convenient history for themselves:

*James :*            *Did you use this word liberation (felszabadulás)?*

*Márton:*        Only when forced to do so. There was a word play, because 'dúlás' means 'laying to waste', and here we had the Tartar-dúlás (*tatárdúlás*), the Turkish-dúlás (*törökdúlás*) and then the '*felszabadulás*'. In this sense I used it quite a lot. But really, at home, I never used it.

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<sup>15</sup> Different post-Communist conservative leaders have utilised different aspects of the recent past. József Antall, the head of the first post-Communist conservative government from 1990, could not – unlike other post-Communist figures such as Walesa and Dubcek – present himself as a resistance hero. His father had played a significant role in the Horthy regime (Rainer, 2005), however, and it was to the sense of continuity between anti-Communist Horthy regime and post-Communist Hungary that he appealed. Viktor Orbán, leader of the conservative FIDESZ party and Prime Minister between 1998 and 2002, referred much more to the conservative legacy of 1956; this was in part because he had established his political credentials demanding that the Soviets leave the country at Imre Nagy's reburial in 1989; hence his political reputation had been built on the back of the memory of 1956 (Gyáni, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Horthy's regency saw the enactment of anti-Semitic legislation (from the early 1920s), the imposition of the Nuremberg Laws in Hungary, the creation of forced labour battalions for Jews, massacres of Jews following the annexation of Transylvania in 1941, and eventually the deportation of Jews to concentration camps after the occupation of Hungary by the German army; however, Hungary under Horthy also remained the one of the safest countries in Europe for Jews fleeing deportation until March 1944. Rather than allude to a mixed legacy, conservatives tended to stress the latter point alone.

James : *Did you meet anybody, in whose opinion, it was a felszabadulás?*

Márton: Loads. I met with lots of narrow-minded Communists: these were abnormally exaggerated people. I knew these kinds of Communists and I heard the speeches they made that would make your hair stand on end. Like when the leader of the local organisation of the Workers' Party was winding up and he said now we must sing the 'Imperialism'. He said it instead of the 'Internationale'. The other, at a peace rally, there was priest sitting in the front row in his cassock, and the workers' leader said, we warmly greet our comrades here present and we also greet with great affection our dear representative of 'clerical reaction'. Naturally it was very funny, they laughed in his face, but I knew these people, who got in with the party organisation.

Other interpretations did more than just sideline Fascism; they also attempted to replace Communism for Fascism as the defining terror regime of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Black Book of Communism*, which some critics argue was written not only to establish the extent of Communist terror, but also to establish that the victims of Communism outnumbered those of Fascism (Kuromiya 2001, p.195)<sup>17</sup> - was frequently mentioned by conservative respondents as their favourite work on Communism. The downplaying of the evils of Fascism, and the new emphasis on the terrors of Communism, served not only to remove the context in which party members' political journey could be understood, but also functioned to present them primarily as collaborators with a terror state. When asked about Fascism by a western interviewer, conservatives sometimes questioned western obsessions with Fascism, and suggested instead that Communism and Communists were the greater evil:

Kálmán: It is interesting that people in the west think that they have to judge Fascism, but not Communism. What sort of logic is this? Communism had many more victims than Fascism....One hears all the time about the Holocaust now. It would have been possible to talk about it for ten or twenty years after the war, but nobody talked about it. Now everybody talks about it. One has to ask, why? Why? Why is it necessary to drag all this up again? ...For forty years nobody was bothered about it... And Hungarian victims, who were victims of Communism, are they worth nothing? They say there were twenty million victims of

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<sup>17</sup>. He argued that "Courtois' attempt to present communism as a greater evil than nazism by playing a numbers game is a pity because it threatens to dilute the horror of the actual killings." (Kuromiya 2001, p.195)

Communism<sup>18</sup>...Fascism did not produce as many victims as Communism.

Whereas some conservative accounts demonised Communism by presenting it as worse than Fascism, others stigmatised it through the direct equating of the two systems. Whereas antifascism had presented history as a struggle between Fascism and Communism, some post-Communist accounts presented these ideologies not as binary opposites but rather philosophical twins. Drawing on totalitarian ideas that had developed in the western world since the 1950s (Gleason, 1995, pp.211-16), they rejected the opposing ideological aspirations of these two ideologies – such as their different ideas about race, class and nation - as unimportant in favour of a perspective which stressed their common tendency towards dictatorship and violence. The Fascist and Communist periods were also equated as eras of occupation; some new narratives envisaged a period of continuous Fascist and Communist occupation from March 1944 to 1989 (Rév 2005, p.44, Rainer 2003, p.230). Rather than addressing the different respects in which these two occupations affected the country, they were both seen as systems which took away Hungary's independence and subordinated the nation to wider empires. With the close association of these two systems established, and their ideological opposition erased, the decision of some to become Fascists out of a fear of Communism, or of others to convert to Communism after their experience of Fascism, became less comprehensible. This direct equating of the two systems was manifested in the stories conservatives told about Arrow Cross members who became Communists. Although such people existed after the war, it is more interesting in this context that conservatives found this story so appealing; it illustrated for them that there was a type of person who was attracted to revolutionary violent dictatorial movements, and hence suggested that Communism and Fascism were in some ways ideological bedfellows.<sup>19</sup> When János was asked about his experiences of the Arrow Cross in the autumn of 1944, he used the opportunity to draw links between their membership, and behaviour, and that of the Communist state security forces that followed after the war. Communism was demonised by linking its party members with Fascism and the Holocaust:

János:           It was the darkest time [under the Arrow Cross], with unfortunate consequences. I was in Budapest and I only know this from hearing about it. Magyaróvár was under Arrow Cross rule, and they were terrorising and rounding up the Jews, and

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<sup>18</sup> His interpretation is clearly moulded by the Black Book of Communism's focus on counting the number of victims in order to judge Communism. This is the figure the Black Book gives for deaths attributable to Communist rule in the Soviet Union, and includes not only state-sanctioned killings, but also deaths in the Gulag, through famine and those indirectly caused. It is interesting that he referred to a figure for deaths outside Hungary to make his point; despite only lasting for approximately eight months (and Communism just over four decades), Fascist rule in Hungary led to a far greater loss of human life (including over 500,000 Hungarian Jews) than the Communist regime did.

<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is also manifested at the conservative 'House of Terror' museum in Budapest; the linking space between the exhibitions on the Fascist and Communist periods is called 'Changing Clothes'. The room contains cloakroom lockers; two mannequins back to back, one dressed in the uniform of an Arrow Cross and one in the garb of a Communist, which spin around; and Rákosi's statement, 'Sometime unfortunately we admit Fascists into our party' printed in large text on the wall. Party members, it is suggested, can merely slip on a new uniform and turn from Fascists into Communists.

those who sympathised with the Jews, and those who weren't sympathetic to the German occupation. These arrests, this harassment, went on day by day. Really it was rather like those times at the beginning of the 1950s, when the ÁVH<sup>20</sup> did this kind of thing. The Communists did it later, but at this point it was the Arrow Cross Fascists. I can say that really lots of Arrow Cross members became Communists, then later did exactly the same thing.

Faced with these stereotypes, ex-party members had to consider how to reconstruct a life story that would be believable, compelling, and morally acceptable to a post-Communist audience. They therefore accentuated the *authenticity* of their antifascism distinct from the negative associations of the corrupted version of the late Communist state. They erased memories of how they had used antifascist stories in the achievement of ambitions, as this would make them appear to be ideologically inauthentic functionaries; rather, they concentrated on aspects of the antifascist story which demonstrated that their support for Communism was born out of genuine suffering, and which emphasised that an antifascist tradition was as much about anti-regime resistance as it was about identification with the Communist state.

Respondents tried to make their attraction to the Communism comprehensible by re-establishing authentic personally-grounded accounts of Fascism and liberation that were distinctive from the antifascist rhetoric that of the Communist state. One respondent was horrified that it was as socially unacceptable to call the arrival of the Red Army a liberation in post-Communist society, as it had been politically unwise to deny the liberation during the Communist period. He believed that this was in part because many Hungarians had not themselves suffered under Fascism, and that general ignorance of the experiences of the Jews and left-wingers permitted the conclusion that liberation was only a myth promulgated by the Communist state. He distanced his account of antifascism and liberation from that favoured during the Communist period by acknowledging the validity of the alternative view of the Red Army as an occupying force. Through a story comparing his own genuine experience of liberation by the Soviets in 1944 with the suffering endured by peasants whose grain was requisitioned by the Red Army soldiers, he sought to be seen as a balanced, unpoliticised and objective historical voice. In being prepared to acknowledge other people's experience of occupation, he hoped his audience might in turn recognize the authenticity of his personal experience of liberation and permit public discussion of 1944-5 as such:

*James:*            *Is it difficult to speak about a 'felszabadulás' today?*

*Jenő:*             Today is much more difficult, because society violently denies that it was a liberation and attacks the idea. I naturally approve of the fact that it is no longer obligatory to call 1945 a liberation, as it

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<sup>20</sup> Az Államvédelmi Hatóság (literally, State Protection Authority), existed 1950-1956.

was under the Communist regime. But saying liberation shouldn't be forbidden, or made almost impossible to say. Here it is a real problem, because the Jews and the left wingers felt it was a *felszabadulás* as the arrival of the Russians and their driving out of the Germans made life much easier, because danger to one's life or the danger of losing one's freedom ended. [But] a large part of the population didn't experience it like that.

At the beginning of 1945 I went to Szeged [a town in south east Hungary] with my brothers and sisters, because there was nothing to eat in Budapest and my parents had not come home, and we had relatives in Szeged and we lived there for a few weeks at the beginning of 1945, we went there immediately after the liberation. There was food there, we went to school...and my younger brother who wasn't in Szeged anymore. He was in Hódmezővásárhely and I went to visit him there. The Soviets had blown up the bridge and you had to travel by ferry and the ferrymen said, '*davaj*' [Russian for 'Give it Here'], and then a great number of the peasant women recited a verse, '*davaj davaj, nem volt tavaly, jobb volt tavaly, nem volt davaj*' ['Give it here, Give it here!', we didn't have this last year, it was better last year, we didn't have 'Give it here!']. And at that time it strongly hit me, that then I understood, that for them it had been better the last year, when for me it had been a nightmare. The last year-1944- had been a terrible year [for *me*], but for *them* 1945 was the terrible year. Then I understood and I realised that although it was a liberation for the intelligentsia, it wasn't really like this for the peasants.

To make these personal accounts believable, some respondents recognised the need for a new type of antifascist language that did not remind other Hungarians of Communist propaganda, but rather evoked sympathy for their personal suffering of the left and Jews. In reviving the story of his 'liberation', which he had suppressed during the Kádár era for fear of confirming a degraded antifascist script, one respondent characterised Soviet troops no longer as 'liberators' but rather 'life-savers':

*James:*            *Do you remember when you heard that the Russian army was getting close to Budapest?*

*Mátyás:*        We were overjoyed. It's absolutely clear. There wasn't any type of ideology or political

requirement [to say it]. The liberators came (*jöttek a felszabadítók*), but today this has become a worn-out phrase, so now one can say, 'the lifesavers came' (*jöttek az életmentők*). If somebody is drowning in water, if somebody throws them a life-ring, then you don't think about the ideological basis on which they threw it to you; it's that simple. The Arrow Cross wanted to wipe us out, they wanted to slaughter us, the Russians came, they saved our lives.

In addition, in order to make their story compelling, they had to challenge the post-Communist downgrading of Fascism and wholesale demonisation of the Red Army. Zsolt placed Fascism at the centre of his wartime stories in order to counter the 'younger generation's' ignorance of it, and, through stories of his own personal experience, tried to refute the prevalent idea that the Red Army was nothing more than a violent atrocity-committing occupier (Mark 2005a). Only through re-establishing the importance of Fascism and their experience of the Red Army as liberators could respondents make their attraction to the Communist party comprehensible:

Zsolt :           Your generation can't even imagine how these times were in Fascist countries... They [war leaders] were Fascists - simply Fascists. There was here and there an exception like Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky and a large boulevard in Budapest is named after him... An Arrow Cross member was standing in an entrance in our street, out in front of the gate. I went out and he stopped me. I said, 'yes?' And he said, machine gun at the ready, at me, 'papers!' or 'identification' or something. And I said, 'yes'. And then in the fraction of a second I thought how clever I am that I have this pistol here, in the jacket, instead of the usual place. And the second dreadful thought was that these Frommels, unlike some modern pistols where the first bullet is already in the tube, didn't have a security lock. For the first bullet you have to pull back the catch which fires it, and this thing gives a very characteristic click, so I thought, 'I am finished'. He will pull the trigger at once when he hears it. So I tried successfully to do the following thing. I did this - 'papers?' 'yes'-(coughs loudly) - I coughed to suppress the click, and fired at once...that's the story.

James:           *So do you remember when you first heard the Russians were coming close to Budapest?*

Zsolt : ...the canon fire was very audible all over Budapest for days and days...when the first Russian appeared at the gate of Szív utca we were very happy. And the innumerable stories about the Russians soldiers, who raped everybody....not a word is true. They behaved like soldiers behave after they take a town which was defended street by street, metre by metre, and they too had suffered heavy losses, so they were not in the best of moods. But, and, it was a matter of course in everybody eyes that sporadic cases of misbehaviour happened. Rapes too. But these cases were very few considering for instance what the other armies did in the Soviet Union or elsewhere. And they weren't vandals. All they wanted was your wrist watch. Well, we all had wrist watches and nobody took it [from us]. But they had a taste for it, for asking for your wrist watch. But they didn't behave brutally. Anyway, the Russians were all right...

By calling for a greater awareness of the variety of experiences of Fascism and the Red Army, an increasing knowledge of the impact of Fascism amongst the new post-Communist generation - by undermining conservative ideas about Red Army occupation and by trying to invent a new language to describe these events, distinct from the degraded antifascism of the late Communist state - respondents hoped to garner sympathy for, and an understanding of, their radicalisation to left-wing politics. They wanted to make it clear that their experience of Fascism led to Communism, and that their antifascist stories were not later inventions of the Communist period. This required not only the recreation of the context of their political radicalisation, but also the repression of the memory of the politically correct versions of their antifascist histories some created after 1948 in order to advantage themselves under the Communist system. This might expose them to the charge of being ideologically inauthentic careerists. It is striking that ex-Communist party members almost never referred to the process of polishing their antifascist biographies between 1948 and 1956 (in order to achieve professional or political ambitions); yet these stories were often mentioned by non-Communists as necessary inventions in order to get on in the system (Mark 2005b).<sup>21</sup>

Central to constructing an authentic antifascism in the post-Communist period was the story of resistance to the early Communist state, and, in particular, involvement in the 1956 revolution. In a post-Communist context it was important for respondents to establish the idea that antifascist language might be used to express opposition to Communist practice; that antifascist ideas did not necessarily signify uncritical support, or a preparedness to iterate unquestioningly the state's politicised version of the past. In addition, some respondents wanted to use resistance stories to legitimise some aspects of the Communist tradition, highlighting the validity of the tradition of

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<sup>21</sup> Ex-party members did admit to manipulating their antifascist biographies for personal gain, but only after 1956 when they no longer supported the party, led depoliticised lives, and had stopped being concerned about moral integrity when instrumentalising their political pasts.

reformed socialism distinct from the ‘degraded’ forms of Stalinism and Kádárism experienced by the Hungarian population. However, after 1989, many ex-party members were shocked to discover that the stories of revolutionary involvement they had repressed during the Kádár period, and felt able to articulate after 1989, were now violently attacked from a new direction: the post-Communist right.

*James:*            *Are there debates about 1956 today?*

*Jenő:*            Of course, there are debates again. But now we are not primarily debating whether it was a counter-revolution, but now they [i.e. right-wingers] want to falsify other things. Before 1989, the Kádár system presented it as a counter-revolution – now the right describes the revolution in just about the same way, but for them this is not a negative but rather a positive sign. They say it was an anti-Bolshevik, anti-socialist revolution and everyone wanted to go back to before 1945 to the Horthy era... They say that we call ourselves reform Communists, and they say that we weren’t really on the side of the revolution, we really remained true Communists and we only wanted to change things just a bit in the interests of the Communist system. According to them, we didn’t have a role in the revolution; only we believed that we had a leading role.

Reform Communists were faced with the charge that they were, in essence, collaborators with the system; their acts of resistance were viewed as unimportant tinkering at the margins. The post-Communist right, who viewed Communism *per se* (rather than just the Stalinist variant) as illegitimate, and as an occupation, argued that only those who attempted to end the Communist regime and eject the Soviet presence were real revolutionaries. Thus the reform Communists’ roles in the revolution were played down, and other political traditions’ involvement, particularly those on the right, were emphasised (Nyyssönen, 1999, p.248; Litván 2002, p.263). In post-Communist conservative accounts, reform Communists cannot be vaunted without first being stripped of their political identity. Thus when conservatives celebrated the role of Imre Nagy after 1989, his Communist past and political beliefs during the revolution were usually sidelined in favour of remembering his execution in 1958; he was transformed from the representative of reformed socialist resistance against Stalinism to a politically decontextualised symbol of the violence of Communist dictatorship (Rév 2005, pp.84-8).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This is the approach used in the House of Terror museum. Imre Nagy features most heavily in the room on Communist justice (as an illustration of the absence of it in his 1958 trial), but is not present in the exhibition room which deals with the uprising itself. Indeed, the museum sites 1956 and its aftermath not within the main two floors of the museum which provide a narrative of Hungarian history from 1944 to c.1958, but in a dark basement room between the reconstructed prison cells of the secret police and the ‘Hall of Tears’ (which commemorates the victims of Communism). This placement suggests that 1956 is not being remembered for its specific political aims but has become historically decontextualised to operate merely as a symbol for the Communist victimisation of the nation. Such an



In the political transition in 1989, the memory of the revolution played a pivotal role; the renaming of 1956 from a 'counter-revolution' to a 'popular uprising' came to symbolise the decline in legitimacy of the Kádár regime and the beginning of a new political order. In the years which immediately followed, political debates over 1956 died down, and it became a relatively politically neutral topic (Rainer 2002, 257). In the mid-1990s, however, the memory of the revolution began to be instrumentalised by both left and right: particular interpretations of the uprising were foregrounded by different groups in order to validate their political programmes in the present. In 1994, the first leftist post-Communist government commemorated the role of reformed socialist Imre Nagy. This was on the one hand an attempt to embrace 1956 for the post-Communist left, but was also interpreted as making amends for Prime Minister Gyula Horn's role in opposing the revolution in 1956 itself.<sup>23</sup> The post-Communist right - in particular the party of Fidesz under Viktor Orbán - framed 1956 as a fight both for freedom and for a 'bourgeois Hungary'; a struggle that only came to a close with the stewardship of the Fidesz government in the late 1990s (Rainer 2003, pp.218-9). They stressed the role of bourgeois interests in the revolution, such as religious conservatives (Litván 2002, p.261).<sup>24</sup> Conservatives have also demonised alternative interpretations; in 1996, Fidesz's party literature marginalised reform socialists' role when discussing the revolution; they were placed alongside Stalinists as merely two different types of 'jailers' (*börtönőrök*) (Litván, 2002, p.263).<sup>25</sup> Whilst respondents felt themselves attacked over their role in the uprising, they also realised that the post-Communist obsession with resistance and 1956 gave them space in the public sphere to explain the relationship between antifascism and opposition.

These debates have not only given these respondents the opportunity to air their stories, but also have shaped their form. Károly had silenced his revolutionary involvement in the Kádár period; his revived revolutionary stories were now moulded by the political divides and tone of contemporary debates. Respondents often used their stories to present themselves, and their political tradition, as the true representatives of the revolution, and to marginalise the role of other groups. Reacting against conservative characterisations of ex-party members as collaborators incapable of proper resistance, Károly framed the key participants in 1956 as antifascist reform socialists, and argued that the right had played a negative role in the revolution. Firstly, he accused conservatives such as Cardinal Mindszenty of sabotaging the revolution by expressing a desire to return to the traditions of pre-1945 Hungary in his speech of November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1956, and thus *almost* being responsible for provoking the retribution of the state and Soviet tanks. By implication, the revolution was much safer in reformed socialist hands, whose aims – the creation of a more democratic socialism - were more limited, but might *almost* have been achieved without right-wing provocation. Secondly, he associated the right's role in the uprising with

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approach makes it easier to write Imre Nagy's politics, and the reform socialist tradition, out of the historical narrative.

<sup>23</sup> It is striking that even though the left has mobilised figures such as Imre Nagy, but other leftist political movements of the revolution, such as the Workers' Councils, have become unfashionable with the decline in leftist working-class culture and are now seldom mentioned.

<sup>24</sup> According to Orbán, "October 23<sup>rd</sup> bequeathed to us the inheritance of national independence, freedom and bourgeois democracy, November 4<sup>th</sup> however gave us the traditions of treason, terror and dictatorship" (Litván, 2002, p.261).

<sup>25</sup> 'A Polgári Magyarországért. „Két pogány közt egy hazáért.” A Fidesz Magyar Polgári Párt vitairata'. 2. kiad. Budapest 1996. Fidesz Országos Elnöksége-Fidesz Központi Hivatal (Litván, 2002 p.263).

extremism, and violence against Hungarian citizens; in a striking final twist to his story, he used his arrest by the Soviet-backed new regime on November 4<sup>th</sup> 1956 to demonise not Communism but the far right whom he had expected were much more likely to arrest him:

Károly: On October 23<sup>rd</sup>, when the revolution broke out in Budapest, then with my friend and one other personal we went to party headquarters...There was a very broad political palette on display - from Imre Nagy to the extreme right – but right to the end I was on the left of the revolution. I still believed in socialism, but it didn't have to be done in the way it was being done, it could have been reformed. Ours was the biggest, more threatening form of resistance, and, interestingly, those who attacked [the system] from within were always the most dangerous. We got information about how to set up a new left-wing party, and in only an hour and a half we started our discussions. We were in a rather optimistic mood...in the afternoon we received a working-class delegation from Miskolc and we went and saw Imre Nagy with them. That meeting was alarming, because the old man was clearly uninformed and incapable of doing anything...It was November 1<sup>st</sup> when we went back to our town and set up a new party organisation.

... We were shocked by Mindszenty's speech<sup>26</sup>, even today I have a very poor opinion of him. Certainly his trial was illegal, but I considered him to be a habitual, consistent reactionary – much more than just a conservative – who hurt us [i.e. the revolutionaries] a lot in 1956. Of course even without him the revolution would have come to an end, but he really harmed the revolutionary movement...

We were sharply anti-Soviet, and when they suddenly the Soviets came back...on 4<sup>th</sup> November, at dawn, I was woken at my flat and there appeared some civilian police with sub-machine guns. At that time, I didn't know that the Russians had come back; they came in and they took me away. I believed that extreme right-wing

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<sup>26</sup> In his radio address of 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1956, Cardinal Mindszenty, following his release from prison, refuted the idea that 1956 was a revolution, preferring to characterise it as a 'fight for freedom' to re-establish the historical traditions which had been broken by the arrival of the Red Army in 1945. This conservative platform was rejecting not just Communism, but also the progressive, democratic system which had emerged between 1945 and 1948.

elements had come [to my flat], because the revolution had become divided, because there were those, who were strongly anti-Communist. Because I stood on a socialist platform, they didn't like it. Only when I was inside the police station did it turn out that this was not the case; rather the old regime had come back and they wanted to execute me. The leader of our county informed my wife, that they would execute me, and then, after I had sat there for a bit, they transferred me to prison and there began my time inside.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1990s, ex-party members sought to make their life stories socially acceptable to a new post-Communist audience. Shocked to find that the antifascist and revolutionary stories they had silenced during the Kádár era were now being attacked by the post-Communist right, they searched for new ways to legitimise their life stories. Rejecting the stereotype of self-interested collaborator, they drew on earlier stories from their pre-1956 political lives in order to refashion themselves as idealistic leftists whose antifascist beliefs had led them not just to support the Communist state, but also to resist it. They used their personal stories to fend off the marginalisation of Fascism and their roles in the 1956 revolution which were central to sustaining this narrative. The revival of their stories was thus not simply the resurgence of stories lost during Kádárism, but rather an older life story re-modelled for a post-Communist audience.

Post-war Communist party members lived through three distinct political environments, in each of which the content and form of their autobiographies changed and served different functions. In the early Communist period, individuals' political attitudes and practices determined the types of autobiographies they created: respondents constructed antifascist life histories to show support and articulate their identification with public histories and the state that produced them; to express resistance where they felt the promise of antifascism to have been betrayed; but also to communicate their ambitions through the production of politically advantageous life narratives that would benefit them in education, career or the party structures. After the defeat of the 1956 uprising and the reprisals that followed, many individuals decided to withdraw from a political life; they would neither support nor resist the Kádár state. Consequently their life stories altered and the antifascist stories which had been central to their political identities were abandoned. When provided with the opportunity to reintegrate into Communist society after 1962 individuals were concerned to protect their private and family worlds from their political pasts. When constructing their life stories, respondents were no longer concerned with issues of

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<sup>27</sup> It was striking that respondents from a variety of political traditions reproduced, in the post-Communist period, aspects of the Kádár-era conception of 1956 as a counter-revolution intent on restoring a bourgeois 'reactionary' state to Hungary. Conservative respondents used it positively to suggest that the revolution was intent on re-establishing a bourgeois Hungary, and that reformed socialists played only a minor role. Reformed socialists (such as Károly above) used the threat of the right-wing restoration in the revolution to suggest that the right had sabotaged the reform process by inviting the Stalinists to suppress the revolution. Supporters of the Kádár system still produce counter-revolutionary rhetoric in the post-Communist testimony.

political or moral integrity and were prepared to manipulate the retelling of their experiences to safeguard their private, apolitical lives. After the collapse of Communism, they were forced to rethink again. Confronted with conservative nationalist voices which demonised them as careerist collaborators, ex-party members revived their anti-fascist stories. They did this now not to demonstrate their support for the Communist state but rather to construct a principled story that they hoped would make their lives morally acceptable for a post-Communist audience. The creation of autobiography has thus played three different roles in their lives: to engage politically, to defend the private sphere against the state and to reassert moral status in the face of an ideologically hostile society.

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