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FILMS ABOUT WORLD WAR I IN HUNGARY AFTER 1945¹

László Deák-Sárosi

Few films about The Great War were produced after 1945, and those that were finished were released for audiences with delay. Some of these films did not deal with the real causes and complexities of the war, while some, disregarding or falsifying the facts, wrote a fake history about the period between 1914 and 1918, about the events that led up to it, and the aftermath, which all appeared to be true. Of course, there are some exceptions to that.

The main reason for not talking about and misrepresenting certain things is the fact that, since the beginning of the twentieth century, possessing and withholding information has been either explicitly or implicitly an important part of warfare. History is written by the victors, who exert their ideological influence on the countries and nations vanquished in the two world wars through historiography and the arts (literature, film), among other means. After 1945, in Hungary it was communist and post-communist influence that was strongest, while in Western Europe primarily the consciousness of guilt—or, for that matter, a self-justifying strategy—of the victorious or of the losing parties was predominant. Neither side promoted the birth and spreading of works of

1 Translated by Dóra Pődör.

art that intended to present facts and unveil the truth; thus, it was mostly the genre of pacifist novels and films, which presented the point of view of an outsider in relation to the causes of the war, that related valid, though only partial, truths.

The following text includes analyses of the banned pacifist film *Ének a búzamezőkről* (*Song of the Cornfields*, 1947, directed by István Szóts), of the pseudo-self-critical communist thesis film *Fábián Bálint találkozása Istennel* (*Bálint Fábián Meets God*, 1980, directed by Zoltán Fábri), and of the film drama on history prior to The Great War, *Redl ezredes I–II.* (“*Colonel Redl*,” 1984, directed by István Szabó). The latter is also important in terms of the subject, because the title character, Colonel Redl, sold important military secrets to the Russian state, which—according to some historical interpretations—significantly influenced the outcome of the war.² The film, an international co-production, shows the monarchy’s decay, a portrayal basically not in line with historical facts. Two documentaries have also been included: *Én is jártam Isonzónál* (“*I was at the Isonzo battle too*,” 1986, directed by Gyula Gulyás and János Gulyás) is one part of a series of films completed ten years later, and practically the only one that still focuses on living veterans of World War I; it raises important and delicate questions with regard to the causes and circumstances of

2 It is right to wonder why “*Colonel Redl*” is a First World War movie when his plot ends in 1913. Apart from debates about Redl’s influence on military operations from 1914 onwards, Szabó’s film also depicts the lives of high ranking officers who took part in the First World War a year later. The presentation of the “Redl case” is far from historical reality, but it is also important how the communist party state and its film industry has interpreted and rewritten these facts. Besides, it is also important to analyze “*Colonel Redl*” because, after 1945, only six to eight films about the First World War were made.

war relationships. *Trianon* (2004, directed by G. Gábor Koltay) collects the effects and reflections of the Trianon Peace Treaty in a unique way.

A Banned Pacifist Film: Ének a búzamezőkről (Song of the Cornfields, 1947)

The first film made after 1945 that can be connected to World War I is based on the novel of the same title by Ferenc Móra, written in 1927. The story takes place in the hinterland and can be summarized as follows: Ferenc, a widower who has returned from Russia where he had been a prisoner of war, has to start a new life. He marries the widow of one of his fellow soldiers, Rókus, who allegedly died during their escape from captivity. However, Ferenc has a secret: Rókus probably died because Ferenc refused to share his last piece of bread with him. In the meantime, Ferenc's son, Péterke, is brought up by Rókus's widow, Etel, along with her own child. Additionally, after being married, Ferenc and Etel have their own baby. One day, Péterke drowns in the bog as a result of a fight he was having with his half-sister for a piece of bread. As a result of the tragedy, Ferenc confesses his sin to his wife; Etel becomes deranged and starts to follow a religious sect. In the meantime, the news arrives that Rókus is alive, but he has no intention of returning home. Etel, who loses her self-control as the result of her involvement with the sect, drowns herself. Ferenc has no other choice but to bring up the (surviving) children on his own.

The pacifist leanings of the film are obvious and authentic. The film is not closely connected to World War I, only to a war situation in general, but it takes place in the Hungarian reality of the era. By the time the film had been completed in 1947, it had also incorporated the experiences of restarting life after World War II. It does not contain specific military or political references, so it expands into a universal human drama through concrete family

tragedies. The story suggests that war disrupts peace in all walks of life: in the individual, in the family, in religious practices, etc. The novel contained only one sensitive thread, according to which a Russian prisoner of war was the lover of Ferenc's wife, Piros, while she was on her own, and that he also fathered Piros's child. Neither the pre-1945 nor the post-1945 censorship liked this idea.³ Director István Szóts would have liked to shoot the film in 1942, but at that time he persisted on strictly following the details of the novel. In 1947, "the body consisting of the intellectual leaders of the Communist Ministry of the Interior and of the Communist Party" also objected to the role of the Russian captive, because "the memories of the violent deeds of the victorious army are yet too fresh."⁴ This criticism is valid, as according to conservative estimates, in 1944–1945 between 50,000 and 200,000 Hungarian women must have fallen victim to the sexual aggression of Soviet soldiers.⁵

Although, according to the director, the intervention in the dramaturgy disrupted the balance of the film,⁶ viewed from the present, it does not appear as a shortcoming. The pacifist, humanist, and lyrical character of the story and the film do remain, and in spite of the tragic storyline, the vigor of the Hungarian peasantry and their attachment to the land comes across with great force.⁷ The film, which was shot as an independent production, was

3 István Szóts, *Szilánkok és gyaluforgácsok* [Splinters and Shavings] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999), 60–61.

4 Ibid.

5 Others put this number at 400,000–800,000; "Hány magyar nőt erőszakoltak meg a szovjetek?" [How Many Hungarian Women Were Raped by the Soviets?], *Múlt Kor historical portal*, Oct. 3, 2013.

6 Szóts, *Szilánkok és gyaluforgácsok*, 61.

7 Ibid., 60.

banned despite it previously having been approved; the reason for this was that it began with a Catholic procession of rogation. The general audience could only watch it after several decades.

“*There Is a Mistake in the Creation*”: Fábíán Bálint találkozásása
Istennel (Bálint Fábíán Meets God, 1980)

The public could not watch any films about World War I in 1947, nor could this happen for a long time afterwards. When the period and the topic were cursorily dealt with at all, the approach taken was ironical and unsympathetic. In the film from 1957, entitled *Bakaruhában* (“*In Soldier’s Uniform*, 1957, directed by Imre Fehér), the lies uttered by the protagonist journalist in his romantic relationship are paralleled by the assumed lies in the enthusiastic recruitment for the war. This assumption can be found both in the film and in the short story by Sándor Hunyadi, on which the film is based.

The first film in which World War I plays an important role from the point of view of the dramaturgy is *Fábíán Bálint találkozásása Istennel* (“*Bálint Fábíán Meets God*,” 1980, directed by Zoltán Fábri). A full series of scenes are connected to the fights on the Italian front, and the rest of the plot takes place after The Great War is finished, but there are several references in the film to the earlier scenes. The eponymous character is a Hungarian man who had fought at the Isonzo front and is not able to get rid of the bloody memory of the Italian soldier he killed. Bálint Fábíán is an honest Hungarian peasant who is righteous and prudent. He does not understand the complexities of life but is instinctively against violence and change. He does not betray his employee, the Baron, during the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, but he, on the other hand, also defends the Communists when the anti-communists want to attack them. Bálint Fábíán’s wife is a pale, sickly woman who dies after a while. He does not know that his wife

had an affair with the local Catholic priest while he has been at the front. The priest was secretly drowned by his sons, and he only has suspicions, “certain signs and hints,” but he never learns the truth. A lot of bad things happen to him and around him, so he believes that “there is a mistake in the Creation” and wants to meet God in order to enquire of him about the causes. His solution is to hang himself on the rope of the church bell during the Christmas service.

The pacifism of this film is not as innocent and neutral as that present in the work of István Szóts. The Zoltán Fábri's film, just like the short novel on which the film is loosely based, explores the collective responsibility of Hungarians and the role of God. The series of scenes about the Italian front poses the question of why the war was happening more clearly. Bálint Fábrián does not understand it, as he is not among the decision makers capable of causing or stopping the war. As a soldier, however, he should have understood whether the fighting in World War I was going on in the interest of his country or not. If he does not understand this, then he cannot be taken seriously when—according to the message of the film—he is the one to pose the philosophical question: Why does the Creator afflict mankind with so much evil? Even his statement, “there is a mistake in the Creation,” has no meaning. His downfall, however, is caused not only by the trauma of war, but by a family tragedy as well.

Bálint Fábrián is an antihero. Although this is not stated in the reviews which appeared in Hungary, this word appears in the title of an article from a Swiss magazine: “*Ein Anti-Held im bürgerlichen Ungarn*.”⁸ The Hungarian reviews, however, note that the character of the protagonist is not consistent, and the problems presented in

8 “Ein Anti-Held im bürgerlichen Ungarn,” *Tele TV Radio Zeitung*, May 8, 1982.

the film are not coherent with each other.⁹ A historical drama—if it is one—mingles with a psychological one.¹⁰ The suicide of Bálint Fábrián can be attributed at least as much to the events of the war and of the revolution/counter-revolution as to his never fully proven suspicion concerning the infidelity of his wife. The wife could have remained loyal to her husband even while he was away fighting on the front, as news of his death never reached her. Bálint Fábrián admits having always felt that his wife did not really love him.

If war is to blame, as well as the infidelity of the woman, and the Church, too, because the lover was a priest, then the root cause of all these events has to be looked for at some higher, more general level. Bálint Fábrián does find the cause, namely that their village had been built on a cemetery. However, this is no explanation and no cause, no fault and no myth, only a superstition, which is not valid reasoning for the whole of Hungary or the world. If the spectator accepts this as a valid cause, then the cemetery becomes a symbol, and if the cemetery as a cause should be taken representatively, then Hungary from the very first is a loser, a dead country, God having created it to be so. Those critics who did not feel that the negative representation of Hungary in the film as a dead or suicidal country was authentic stated that the film became stuck at the level of realistic and anecdotic representation, although the novel on which it is based did manage to get to the level of mystical authenticity.¹¹

9 László Fábrián, “Elmaradt találkozás” [Missed Encounter], *Film Színház Muzsika*, March 22, 1980, 11–12.

10 Béla Mátrai-Betegh, “Temetőre épült falu: Fábri Zoltán: Fábrián Bálint találkozása Istennel” [A Village Built on a Cemetery: Zoltán Fábri. Bálint Fábrián Meets God], *Filmkultúra*, no. 3 (1980): 20–26, here: 25.

11 Interview with György Báron in Kossuth Rádió (*Láttuk, hallottuk*, March 20, 1980).

However, the same basic problem can already be found in the novel. As a critic writes about the book of József Balázs: At “the bottom of Christian hierarchy,” there can be found a “*person who commits suicide*,”¹² and man “is not forsaken by culture even at the moment of his death.”¹³ Thus Bálint Fábrián is an antihero, and his character and fate indicate that he is part of a suicidal culture.

Obviously, not all critics in 1980 thought that this representation of the Hungary of 1918-1920, or of the country, or of the given region, or of Bálint Fábrián's village on the shore of the river Kraszna was valid. In an article that appeared in the periodical *Filmkultúra* (*Film Culture*), one can find the following: “He keeps repeating up to his death that no well can be dug in this place as all kinds of bones keep being unearthed, and everywhere there are only cemeteries, cemeteries, as it is stated in the Bible.’ This simple man does not realize that in this Nyírség soil, in Hungarian soil, not only bones can be found, not only cemeteries bring malediction on the living ones. In the deep, like rumbling lava ore, there is life and sweat as well.”¹⁴

A Traitor Made a Victim and Hero: István Szabó's Redl ezredes
I-II. (“Colonel Redl,” 1984)

István Szabó's film takes place before 1914, however, it is still strongly a World War I film. As the title indicates, it treats the life

12 Emphasis in the original; Károly Varga, “Mikor lehet egyenlő a három a végtelennel? Balázs József kérdéseiről, úgy ahogy itthonról látjuk” [When Can Three Equal to the Infinite? Concerning the Questions of József Balázs, As We See It from Home], *Szabolcs-Szatmári Szemle*, no. 2 (1980): 87–97, here: 95.

13 Varga, “Mikor lehet egyenlő a három a végtelennel? Balázs József kérdéseiről, úgy ahogy itthonról látjuk,” 95.

14 Mátrai-Betegh, “Temetőre épült falu: Fábri Zoltán. Fábrián Bálint találkozása Istennel,” 26.

of Colonel Alfred Redl, who held a high position in the Austro-Hungarian army, and before his death in 1913 he served as the deputy head of the secret service. After his exposure, it turned out that for a long time he had been selling important military secrets for money to the Russians and the Italians. The military leadership of the time, being afraid of public exposure, forced the Colonel to commit suicide. However, the details were discovered and made public by a journalist.¹⁵

The summary of the plot of the film is the following: Alfred Redl, offspring of a Ruthenian (Transcarpathian Ukrainian) family of railway men, advances to become a colonel and later the deputy chief of the intelligence service of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Already as a little boy, Redl composes a praise poem about his emperor, and he even misses his father's funeral in order to celebrate Emperor Franz Joseph's name day in the military school. All through his life, a special bond attaches him to his aristocratic schoolmate, the Hungarian Kristóf Kubinyi and to his sister, Katalin. He wants to be like them; he wants to efface his past and his family from his memory. He is driven by the ambition to advance and by the loyalty to the Emperor. Based on his investigations as the leader of the secret service, he recommends a purge of the military leadership of the monarchy. However, Redl has a weak point: He is trying to hide his homosexuality. A young Italian man is sent to him on purpose and starts an affair with him. So Redl gives away some important, but not memorizable, military secrets to him. However, Redl realizes from the start that

15 Egon Erwin Kisch, *A Redl-ügy* [The Redl Affair] (Bucharest: Téka, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1974). Original: *Der Fall des Generalstabschefs Redl* (1924). In Hungarian on the internet: <https://sites.google.com/site/azido-harcokatujraz/home/2-szemelyes-haboruk/redl-ezredes-miatt-veszett-el-a-haboru-uegye>

the young Italian is a spy, thus he may as well have withheld the information or may have just shot him. Although the Colonel is the deputy head of the secret service, he is still being watched, and because of his treason the military chiefs of staff give him the order to commit suicide, which he does.

The story of the treason and exposure of Colonel Redl was amply discussed by the press of the day, and several literary representations are also well known. István Szabó and the co-writer of the script, Péter Dobai, discuss their sources in the insert at the beginning of the film: “Our film is not based on authentic historical documents. All the actions of the characters are the result of the imagination. Our work was inspired by John Osborne’s drama, *A Patriot for Me*, and by the historical events of our century.” One can find a contradiction already in this introduction, as the makers of the film make a claim to interpret history authentically in spite of the fact that they disregard authentic documents.

The weekly periodical *Élet és irodalom*, (*Life and Literature*), which focuses on literature and public life, published an interview with a military historian, Dr. Márton Farkas, on the 15th February, 1985. He confirmed that the contemporary documents of the investigation and material published by journalists can be regarded authentic: “Nothing new has come to light since then. Thus we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that there is no Redl-secret or Redl-legend; everything happened the way it happened, and only that happened which we had already known about.”¹⁶ Thus the film is based on the falsification of facts, and this was well known already in 1985, both by the makers of the film and the

16 László Szále, “Kém vagy bűnbak: Beszélgetés Redl ezredesről” [“Spy or Scapegoat: A Conversation about *Colonel Redl*”], *Élet és irodalom*, Feb. 15, 1985.

audience.¹⁷ In spite of this, the film has been accepted as authentic with only a very few exceptions, mostly because of artistic and aesthetic reasons. Even the military historian cited above took the side of this fictional story, which is very far from the truth: “In the end I have to say—even if I cause disappointment—that the story of Redl as conceptualized by István Szabó and Péter Dobai is more interesting than the original one had been.”¹⁸

The author of another article stresses that the fall of Redl is not historically authentic, and that there is no twentieth century history “in general”; moreover, that “the real Redl was not the victim of a set-up plan, and his alter-ego in the film is a thoroughly corrupt careerist, whose fall cannot be compared in any way to the tragedy of revolutionaries who were the victims of the unlawful acts of state in the 1950s; the problem lies in the psychological representation.”¹⁹ However, the psychological representation—no matter how the author of the article defends the film—should not vindicate inconsistent characterizations of the protagonist either as a traitor or a victim. The makers of the film should have either stuck to the facts, or should have changed the names, the location, and the time of the events happening.

17 Discussions on historical facts and truths of the Szabo’s film are not limited to conservative or right-wing commentators. In the communist press of 1985, the renowned left-wing film critic Ervin Gyertyán also analyzed Szabo’s rewriting of the story. In his conclusion, Gyertyán claimed that Szabo should at least have changed the protagonist’s name (Ervin Gyertyán, “Stage and Illness: István Szabó’s New Film, *Colonel Redl*,” in *Népszabadság* 2, no. 16 (1985). Regarding Gyertyán see also the following pages.

18 László Szále, “Kém vagy bűnbak: Beszélgetés Redl ezredesről” [Spy or Scapegoat: A Conversation About *Colonel Redl*], *Élet és irodalom*, Feb. 15, 1985.

19 Gyertyán 1985.

The makers of the film insist—maybe because of or in spite of the insert—that they are writing authentic history. I quote here the director of the film, István Szabó: “The story of this man takes place in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. I want everything accurate and authentic. This is my task, as far as the clothes, the objects, the manners are concerned. I am not thinking symbolically, as in that moment, my desire to make an accurate film would fall into pieces.”²⁰

If we are seeing an interpretation of history that does not reflect reality, then it is worthwhile to examine the motivation of the makers. These are basically of two categories of motivation, arising from their connection to the ruling power, to the ruling ideology in Hungary between 1945 and 1989. First, it was in their interest to discredit the monarchy and its military chiefs of staff; second, it was also in their interest to acquit the traitor Redl. After the premiere of the film (made as a Hungarian/Austrian/West German/Yugoslavian co-production) in Vienna, a significant section of the Austrian press attacked the film because of its interpretation of history: “The Austrian Colonel Redl was selling the most important military secrets to the Russians for more than a decade. For money. So, for example, he owned two private cars—which was highly unusual before 1914. Now the Hungarians—with Austrian money, with the money of ORF—have made a film about Redl. Although it is emphasized that the actions of the characters are not identical with those of long ago, still, the film is about the old Austria, that is what it is all about, and this history is repulsively misrepresented. Redl is like a champion of peace, who wants to save his country from war, and the Austrian officers are sadists,

20 Tamás Skultéty, “Mindig előlről kell kezdeni: Beszélgetés Szabó Istvánnal” [One Always Has to Start from Scratch: An Interview with István Szabó], *Magyar Hírlap*, Feb. 16, 1985.

drunkards, and sons of bitches. It is inconceivable how, after all this, an army with such leaders was capable of fighting for their country for four years at the price of the greatest sacrifices. This film, which is otherwise excellent from the artistic point of view—just like Colonel Redl himself at the time—has again betrayed Austria to foreign countries. In these countries, the film had great success due to a wave of nostalgia. On our part, on the part of Austria, however, we can only state that this is a shame, which is especially aggravated by the fact that the protagonist is played by one of our most prominent actors.”²¹ One of the journalists of the daily paper *Magyar Hírlap* (*Hungarian Herald*) mentions that Mr. Gerd Bacher, the chief intendant of ORF, gave an interview for the *Kronen-Zeitung* where he stated that he had issued an internal circular several weeks earlier, as—ORF being one of the partners in the co-production of the film—he felt himself responsible for the outcome: “The release to the world of such a falsification of history can not be considered the task of an Austrian state monopoly institution.” However, Austrian cinemas seem to have been filled at the premiere of the film in spite of the criticisms. The magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Der Stern* published favorable reviews about the film.²²

Why the falsification of history provoked resentment in Austria does not need an explanation. Also, it is not by accident that in Hungary this misrepresentation was mostly received favourably. I am going to cite István Szabó, whose views are supported by the journalist: “I have reasoned out, and then, with my colleagues, I have accomplished my own special version, our special version. I am not stating that this is the only possible conception of Redl.”

21 Article about the Viennese premiere of *Colonel Redl*. Vienna, April 1985, cited in: *Magyar Hírlap*, April 13, 1985. The journalist was Pál Geszti.

22 Ibid.

And the journalist adds: “But for us—this is the best. This is certain.”²³

Szabó seemingly gave an ambiguous interpretation of the protagonist. He sometimes considers him a traitor, sometimes a victim, and in one sense even a hero. This is the result of the fact that, according to Szabó, Redl was a traitor with respect to himself, his family, the army, and the monarchy; but in selling out the cause of his country and fellow countrymen, he was a hero: “Redl is not simply a compromiser, but a big traitor. He begins with small betrayals: he betrays his parents, his brothers and sisters, his friends, his class, his bosses. He commits a small betrayal every day, which will build up into a huge, unified betrayal—and this is going to

23 D. L., “Redl ezredes” [Colonel Redl], *Délmagyarország*, March 14, 1985. “For us”; this expression refers to the leadership of the soft dictatorship of the Communism Regime of Kádár, and to the members of the servile intelligentsia serving the regime—writers, journalist, film directors, film historians, military historians, and experts, who were happy to bury with such a film as well the old Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The other motive is a much more personal one, and is connected to the director, but is at least as much of public interest as the wish of the leaders of the Communist-Socialist party state and its beneficiaries to discredit the monarchy. Their predecessors were partly responsible for the breaking up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Compare the facts concerning the effects of the Aster Revolution of 1918 and of the 1919 Dictatorship of the Proletariat (Ernö Raffay, *Szabadkőművesek Trianon előtt* [Free Masons Before Trianon] (Budapest: Kárpátia Stúdió, 2011)). This direct motive was not yet known in 1985, but in 2006 it came to light that István Szabó, the director of the film, had been a very active and very useful III./III. communist secret agent after 1956. Cf. András Gervai, *Fedőneve: “Szocializmus” - Művészek, ügynökök, titkosszolgák* [Cover-Name: “Socialism”: Artists, Agents, Spies] (Budapest: Jelenkor Kiadó 2010).

include his self-betrayal as well. He betrays even his own instincts, his own feelings.”²⁴ The reporter (Tamás Sámathy) asks: “After all, is the Colonel a likeable person?” István Szabó replies: “I think he is. His horrible fate makes us see a man struggling in the snare of the contradictions of history and politics. In the case of such a talented man as Redl, there is no judge who could decide whether he is guilty or not.”²⁵ Thus, according to the director, talent stands above truth. Some journalists, agreeing with this view, wrote the following: “The film of István Szabó—in the opinion of one of our historians—is more interesting than historical reality itself, than the documents at our disposal. [...] As a matter of fact, in discussing the film, I believe that it is of minor importance whether Colonel Redl was a victim or a traitor.”²⁶ *Colonel Redl* won awards at several festivals: in Budapest, Cannes, Sopot, Valladolid, Rueil-Malmaison, Rome, Hollywood, London, Warsaw, and Germany. Indeed, it was not necessarily in the interest of the critics, apart from those in Austria and Hungary, to go after the facts.

Hungarians and World War I: I Was at the Isonzo Battle Too (Én is jártam Isonzónál, 1986)

In the 1980s and the 1990s, a documentary about World War I was produced that, despite its small deficiencies, can be considered a landmark, as it deals with the causes of The Great War in full detail. The second film of a series, for which originally three films had been planned by Gyula Gulyás and János Gulyás, was released in 1986. Its title was *Én is jártam Isonzónál* (*I was at the Isonzo battle*

24 István Szabó, quoted in Skultéty, “Mindig előlről kell kezdeni. Beszélgetés Szabó Istvánnal”.

25 Sámathy 1985.

26 János Tamási, “Áruló vagy áldozat?” [“Traitor or Victim?”], *Népújság (Tolna)*, March 12, 1985.

too), and the series was named *Magyarok és az I. Világháború* (*Hungarians and World War I*). It is interesting that before the change of regime (the fall of Communism) in 1989–1990, only the second film could be completed and released; maybe because this film was the one that contained the fewest number of facts that were embarrassing for the Communist leadership. The causes and circumstances that led to the war, the events on the Russian and other fronts, the role of the Soviet Republic of Councils of 1919 and of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the military collapse of the monarchy, and the Trianon peace treaty ending the war were all considered taboo.

The above topics were either not dealt with in the second film, or they appeared only indirectly, on the level of references; maybe that is why the film was allowed to be shown in cinemas at all. *Én is jártam Isonzónál* mostly recalls the events of the Italian front, but it also deals briefly with other locations and aspects as well, such as the general characteristics of the war; the relationship between officers and subalterns; the happenings of the war; the truce at the end of the war and the military collapse of the monarchy; the happenings in the hinterland, among them the Aster Revolution of 1918; demobilization of soldiers and their return home. The filmmakers sought out eighty- to ninety-year-old veterans, who evoked their own memories about World War I with words and pictures in their homes in different parts of the country. In the second part of the film, twenty-three Hungarian veterans took part in a commemorative journey in Italy, in the course of which they visited the fighting locations near Piave and Isonzo; the cemeteries of Doberdo, where their comrades-in-arms rest; and they also met their former Italian antagonists in Fossalta di Piave and Venice at a common reconciliatory commemoration. The tour was organized by General Guiseppe Santoro and the association of veterans called “Ragazzi 99” (“The Lads of 99”), and the Italian

deputy minister of defence at the time also took part in the events. A “church of commemoration” was consecrated at a Catholic mass where a child was also baptized, the Hungarian and Italian veterans exchanged the flags of peace, and finally they placed a wreath into the Piave River, where about a hundred thousand Hungarian soldiers, and about the same number of Italian, had lost their lives.

The film had a mixed reception. Some critics enthusiastically welcomed the fact that, after a long time, the subject of World War I was revisited and received publicity,²⁷ but there were some who were either disturbed by the facts, or considered what can be seen and heard in the film only half-truths.²⁸ For example, someone in an article vehemently criticized the fact that the veterans dared to mention the role of the hinterland and of the Aster Revolution in the military collapse of the monarchy.²⁹ However, more recent work by historians justifies the raising of such questions.³⁰ Moreover, these old veterans also accepted their own responsibility. Dr. Ferenc Sailer, who fought as an officer on the Italian front, admits that it was a mistake to take away the arms from the Hungarian soldiers on their way home and to put all of these into the last wagon of the train; some people uncoupled the

27 Article in *Fejér Megyei Hírlap* about the film: *Én is jártam Isonzónál* (“*I Was at the Isonzo Battle Too*”), May 20, 1987.

28 Ágnes Koltai, *Emlék és varázslat: Magyar film. Én is jártam Isonzónál* (“*Memory and Magic: Hungarian Film. I Was at the Isonzo Battle Too*”), Új tükör, May 24, 1987).

29 László Zöldi, *Tőr a hátba* (“*Dagger in the Back*”), *Élet és irodalom*, May 8, 1987.

30 Ernő Raffay, *Balkáni birodalom: Nagy-Románia megteremtése 1866–1920* [An Empire of the Balkans: The Creation of Greater Romania 1866–1920], (Budapest: Kárpátia Stúdió, 2010). Cf. Raffay, *Szabadkőművesek Trianon előtt*.

wagon, and thus, for example, the soldiers faced grave problems when trying to defend themselves during the troubled times of upheaval. The Hungarian military leadership was also responsible for putting the truce into effect immediately, although the signed agreement allowed twenty-four or thirty-six hours. During this time gap, about 300,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers were taken captive.

The discussion of the taboos in the film, which did not please the party state, was also criticized by those who basically had a good opinion of the film. Ervin Gyertyán, one of the eminent film critics of the years just before the fall of the Communist Regime in 1989–1990, expresses his belief not only in the responsibility of the Habsburg leadership, but also in that of István Tisza (prime minister of Hungary of the time), and resents the mentioning of the responsibility of Mihály Károlyi (a later prime minister) in any way.³¹ The film indeed mentions Károlyi as the one responsible for retreating from the Transylvanian front in 1919, when he was no longer prime minister nor president of the Republic.³² Some smaller corrections and additions to the recollections of the veterans would have been useful, as they did indeed authentically interpret the events that they themselves had lived through; however, they could have made mistakes concerning far-away events or affecting the whole country (particularly as far as time and location are concerned).

31 Gyertyán 1987.

32 However, his Minister of Defense was Béla Linder, who declared on Oct. 31, 1918 that “I never want to see soldiers again!” And the Soviet Republic of Councils of 1919 was a direct result of the Aster Revolution, the leadership of which (including Mihály Károlyi) did not take a stand for Transylvania and the other Hungarian territories when they came under attack.

The other films in the series, which were completed by 1997, partly fill the gaps and correct the historical knowledge that was taught differently before 1989 (when historical knowledge was not always compatible with facts and the truth) and could not be a part of the second film. Even the dissatisfied critics admit that the film (and the films) definitely fill a gap. The Gulyás brothers managed to interview veterans who had been on the front and had immediate experiences about World War I at the very last minute. Several of the most important interviewees above eighty were actually dead by the time the film was released. It also has to be noted that filming started in 1982 and continued well after the premiere of the second film, up to 1991—basically as long as survivors could still be found. The original trilogy became four films, and the episodes released in 1997, as the titles suggest, dealt with both the earlier and the later events of the war from the beginnings to the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, which heavily afflicted Hungary: The first, *Meggondoltan, megfontoltan* (*Prudently, sagely*); The third, *Soha többé katonát nem akarok látni!* (*I do not ever want to see soldiers again!*); The fourth, *Rabló béke* (*Unjust peace*).

The film not only evokes the events of the Great War, but it also shows some of the later life of the veterans, who were living in poverty, often in unworthy circumstances, on a small pension. Some of them were still working though over eighty: for example, Vilmos Steinbach, a former infantryman, or István Hógyi, a former messenger of the Chiefs of Staff. It is very compelling to see and hear that not only did the state fail to provide a pension that would have ensured a reasonable level of existence for the veterans who had been sent to the front to defend their country by the politicians of the time, but that there were also some whose livelihood was taken away from them in the Rákosi era. József Szücs, one of those soldiers whose legs had to be amputated, related to the

filmmakers that, in the 1950s, first his lands, and then his licence for the sale of tobacco, were taken away from him. The party state of the period before 1989 treated the veterans of World War I so unkindly because it tried to distance itself from the Hungary of World War I and the Hungary of the pre-1920 period in general. Some critics stressed the fact that the soldiers did not even know what they were fighting for.³³ There may have been indeed a few such young, uneducated, and ill-informed people, but most of the interviews show that the former soldiers knew very well that they were defending their own country, as it was Italy that attacked the monarchy, even though Italy may have had a reason to do so. Some of the interviewees enlisted in the Transylvanian Szekler Division after returning from the Italian front, as they did not want the Romanians to conquer the territory of Hungary up to the River Tisza. In the other films, there is a veteran who, in spite of his ideological reservations, still joined the Red Army, willing to defend and reconquer some Hungarian territories, later on, for example, a part of Upper Hungary (today Slovakia). Special mention should be made of the Slovak man Jan Kellner from the third film, who supported the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy not only out of emotional, but also ideological and economic, considerations; along with some other Slovaks, he fought on the side of the Hungarians as long as he could after the military collapse of the monarchy.

In the first film, released in 1997, what was not allowed to be stated publicly before 1990 could finally be articulated, namely that prime minister István Tisza and the Hungarian leadership opposed the decision to enter the war. Historians discovered that István Tisza was not among the warmongers—though not for

33 György Báron, *Én is jártam Isonzónál* [*I Was at the Isonzo Battle Too*], *Képes* (May 7, 1987).

pacifist reasons—even when he had to defend the imperial policy in the Parliament.³⁴

The four documentary films of the Gulyás brothers are unparalleled and irreplaceable as far as the memory of World War I and its consequences are concerned. The second film, which was produced in 1986 and released in 1987, *Én is jártam Isonzónál*, was planned to be presented to the public in form of a book edited by the MAFILM Budapest Studio, though the manuscript remained unpublished.³⁵

*A Lyrical Documentary of the Outcome of World War One:
Trianon (2004)*

Another film entitled *A vörös grófnő I-II (The red countess, 1984*, directed by András Kovács) focused on the era of World War I too and especially on the eve and the aftermath of it. It was produced before the fall of Communism in Hungary and adapts the memoirs of Mrs. Katinka Károlyi (Károlyni Mihályné, née Andrassy, the wife of prime minister Mihály Károlyi), *Együtt a forradalomban (Together in the revolution)*, published in 1968, for the screen.³⁶ Her individual point of view cannot, however, be regarded as a reliable historical source. According to experts, the countess idolized her husband to such an extent that she was not able to paint a realistic

34 Participation in the war was voted for by, among others, the representatives of the Romanian minority, who later turned against Hungary because of her participation in the War (Raffay, *Szabadvőművesek Trianon előtt*).

35 *Én is jártam Isonzónál [I Was at the Isonzo Battle Too]*, MAFILM Budapest Stúdió, manuscript. Budapest, 1987. It is worth reading Dr. József Hary (a former platoon-commander) memoirs of the Italian front (József Hary, *Az utolsó emberig: Isonzói jelentés* [“To the Last Man: Report From Isonzo”] (Budapest: Püski Kiadó, 2011).

36 Károlyi Mihályné (Mrs. Katinka Károlyi), *Együtt a forradalomban* [“Together in the Revolution”] (1968).

picture of him and of the era.³⁷ The Andrassy viewpoint is complemented by the work of Cécile Tormay's *Bujdosó könyv* (An outlaw's diary).³⁸ However, no film adaptation of this book has been yet made.

However, a documentary was made about the aftermath of World War I with the title *Trianon* (2004, directed by Koltay Gábor). This film depicts this era with more accuracy and in a more complex way than any other Hungarian film before. The film, which was released in 2004, deals with the peace of Trianon and also discusses many aspects of the Great War in detail. The 128-minute production reconstructs the era with the help of contemporary photos, documents, and films sources. The reflections of writers, poets, historians, and public figures as well as the shock caused by the partitioning of the Kingdom of Hungary are effectively presented by the interpretation of actors. It is not widely known, for example, that the young Attila József wrote the poem "Nem, nem, soha!" ("No, No, Never!") as a result of the peace treaty. The poem is recited in the film by Gábor Koncz, who had played the antihero Bálint Fábián twenty-four years earlier in Zoltán Fábri's film. Apart from the lyrical reminiscences, writers, historians, and artists recall certain facts and documents that were forbidden or inadvisable to talk about for a long time. The main contributors are the writers István Csurka and Miklós Duray, the historians Ferenc Fejtő and Ferenc Glatz, the literary historian István Nemeskürty, the politician and university professor Imre Pozsgay, the historian Ernő Raffay, the sculptor Tibor Szervátiusz, as well as the politician and Hungarian bishop of the Reformed Church (Romania), László Tőkés.

This film at last presents the causes, facts and circumstances concerning the breakout of the war. The literary historian István

37 Tamás Kovács, "Károlyi Mihályné: a férjét isteníő vörös grófnő" [Mrs. Katinka Károlyi: The Red Countess Who Idolized Her Husband], *Múlt-Kor*, Sept. 10, 2012). <http://mult-kor.hu/cikk.php?id=37365>.

38 Cécile Tormay, *Bujdosó könyv* ["An Outlaw's Diary"], 1920.

Nemeskürty calls the attention to the fact that—from his own perspective—it was not the monarchy and Hungary that wanted war in the first place, but rather France and Russia; the latter wished to expand its control in the direction of the Balkans. The heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was shot in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, who had been trained with Russian money, and this event is recognized as the immediate cause of the breakout of the war. It is also Nemeskürty who questions the legitimacy of the Aster Revolution of 1918 and expresses his doubts if it was a revolution at all: For example, Mihály Károlyi was appointed prime minister by the King on the phone during the chaotic days of the truce ending the war.

Gábor Koltay's film is extremely detailed and multi-layered, but it does not deal with important aspects like—among others—the activities and standpoints of left-wing politicians and revolutionaries with regard to the territorial losses of Hungary after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. Thus, history, literature, and film still have questions to answer.³⁹

39 Why did the left-wing politicians and the revolutionaries not make a stand for the interests and the territorial integrity of Hungary during and after the military collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, in an era when, for example, the Russians defended the last piece of ground of their country even after the socialist/communist revolutions and “coups”? Not even István Nemeskürty, who posed this question in the film, could give an answer to it, although he was interested in World War I not solely from the point of view of literary and film history, but also for family reasons: He describes how his maternal grandfather and his family were chased away by the Czechs from the northern part of the town of Komárom in 1919 to the Hungarian side of the town, where, deprived of everything, they had to start life from the very beginning. Today, the northern part of the town belongs to Slovakia, while the southern part is Hungarian territory.