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## Spectacular History: Photography, Film and Exhibitions in Representations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic after 1956

The article explores the implications of communist representations of history as it relates to representation and evidence in historical theory. It investigates the attempts of the party historians to establish a historical connection between the “counterrevolutions” of 1919 and 1956: as they argued, the counterrevolution that had been born in 1919 and ruled the country until 1945 and, subsequently, been forced “underground” by the Soviet Red Army and the new communist power, was able to “resurrect itself” once again in 1956. It examines how they attempted to authenticate this historical abstraction through various historical, mostly visual, records: photography, film and exhibitions. The article argues that an unusual attitude towards evidence prevailed in these historical works. Although communist historians boasted of referring to an abundance of original source material, their narrative frames of representation proved to be fictitious: sources were selected not in order to draw conclusions regarding historical processes, but instead to illustrate various pre-figured abstract constructions of history. The aim of this method was to maintain the separation of the empirical source base and the philosophical-theological imagination surrounding the meanings of history in order to unbind the latter from evidence and tie it to political ideologies and commitments.

Keywords: communist historiography, visual representation, authenticity

### *Introduction*

What makes abstract historical interpretations authentic? What types of techniques, evidence and procedures come to the fore in establishing the authenticity, realism or credibility of various historical representations? What is the role of the historian in producing and making these means available? The following article discusses a special case connected to these broader questions. It examines how communist historical-ideologists, propagandists and historians proper used various visual representations, photographs, films and museum exhibitions as evidence for their historical narrative based on the alleged continuity of the “counterrevolutions” in 1919 following the fall of Béla Kun’s Hungarian Soviet Republic and in 1956 following the anti-Stalinist uprising that overthrew the Rákosi dictatorship. The article explores those intellectual and

political contexts prevailing in János Kádár's post-1956 restoration régime that caused the creators of communist history to believe in the authenticity of their abstract historical construction.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of evidence and proof present in the historiography of communist historical writings is due to a remarkably significant extent to typical rather than specific ideological and intellectual backgrounds. During the Cold War, non-communist interpreters of communist historical production were largely interested in deconstructing and dismantling scholarship on the past by authors from Eastern Bloc states that critical historiography had with some justification—though probably too easily—disqualified as falsification and ideological distortion of evidence; consequently it had very little stake in conducting analysis of the modes of dealing with original documents and authentic historical records. As a consequence, this tendency of scholarship could not make sense of the admiration of original historical documents that was so typical of most of official historical production during the period of Eastern European communist dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the mainstream Cold War inquiries, post-1989 analyses tend to regard communist historiography predominantly as a means of constructing narrative legitimacy. In this perspective, the association of modes of emplotment and generic structures with political and cultural implications seems sufficient to understand the characteristics of communist historical representation. As a consequence, these interpretations risk equating the production of communist historical propaganda with normal historical scholarship and therefore hardly provide any means of carrying out a critical assessment of the ways and extent to which ideological historiography

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1 Recently there has been a growing interest in the problems of material and textual evidence and in the possibility of proving historical representations, particularly as the use of visual means is concerned. The problem is aptly illustrated in Suzanne Marchand and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds., *Proof and Persuasion: Essays on Authority, Objectivity and Evidence* (Princeton–Brepolis: Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, 1996).

2 Matthew P. Gallagher, *The Soviet History of World War II: Myths, Memories, and Realities* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976); John Keep, ed., *Contemporary History in the Soviet Mirror* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964); Nancy Whittier Heer, *Politics and History in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA–London: MIT Press, 1971); Michael J. Rura, *Reinterpretation of History as a Method of Furthering Communism in Rumania: A Study in Comparative Historiography* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1961); Samuel H. Barron and Nancy W. Heer, eds., *Windows on the Russian Past: Essays on Soviet Historiography since Stalin* (Columbus: American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, 1977).

deviates from proper historical investigation.<sup>3</sup> This article suggests a different path and examines a case in which the appropriation of original historical records, the burden of proof and authenticity played an important role. Through demonstration of the mode of visual narrative emplotment, its moral implications and political context, I will seek to answer how the ideological prescriptions shaped the use and function of evidence in these representations. As a conclusion, I will argue that the eventual failure of party historians to establish a proper evidential paradigm rendered their narrative pre-figurations ineffective and their moral-political implications inauthentic.<sup>4</sup>

### *Revelations of Photography*

The crucial component of the Kádárist myth of political legitimacy was the argument that the revolt in 1956 had represented a “counterrevolution” aimed at overthrowing the popular democracy established in Hungary, restoring capitalist exploitation, leading the country to colonial dependence on Western imperialism and restoring counterrevolutionary White Terror against all democratic and anti-Fascist forces, particularly the communists. Interpretations of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic became the crucial and decisive factor in transforming the anti-Stalinist insurrection in October 1956 into a genuine counterrevolution in communist terms. For communists the most shocking occurrence of 1956 was the siege of the Budapest party headquarters on *Köztársaság tér* (“Republic Square”), where the insurgents mercilessly massacred captured defenders of the building. The communists realized that these radicals had been present as an element of the rebellion from the very beginning, claiming that they had, in fact, organized the uprising and following the occupation of the party headquarters had openly called for the restoration of capitalist dictatorship and the annihilation

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3 Georg Iggers, Konrad Jarausch, Matthias Middel, and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als Forschungsproblem* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998); Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die historische Meistererzählung: Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); Rainer Eckert and Bernd Faulenbach, eds., *Halbherziger Revisionismus: Zum Postkommunistischen Geschichtsbild* (Munich–Landberg am Lech: Olzog–Aktuell GmbH, 1996), esp. 11–23, 69–82; Joachim Höslér, *Die Sowjetische Geschichtswissenschaft 1953 bis 1991: Studien zur Methodologie und Organisationsgeschichte* (Munich: Sagner, 1995).

4 From various perspectives, numerous authors have argued for incorporating the practice of research back into the description of historical creative work: Paul Ricoeur, “Histoire et rhétorique,” *Diogenes* 168 (October–December 1994): 9–26. See also David Carr, “Die Realität der Geschichte,” in *Historische Sinnbildung*, ed. Klaus E. Müller and Jörn Rüsen (Hamburg: Rowohlt Tb., 1997), 309–28.

of the defenders of the communist régime.<sup>5</sup> The conclusion that the massacre of communists must be interpreted as a sign of counterrevolution was confirmed by the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, when paramilitaries who called themselves counterrevolutionaries and who aimed to restore the pre-1914 social and political order persecuted, tortured and executed communists, leftists and Jews. For party leaders the two events were strikingly similar. From the communist perspective, the revolution in October 1956 was none other than the revival of the White Terror that took place following the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the second coming of the counterrevolutionaries of 1919.

In this respect, the history of the Kádár era is that of a constant historiographical project focused on the documentation of the counterrevolution and its transformation into an intelligible narrative. The new communist government presented its official interpretation of the 1956 revolution in the so-called “White Books.” This series of five volumes was prepared by the government Information Office in 1956–58 with the purpose of publishing evidence on the “counterrevolutionary nature” of the events that had taken place in Hungary in the fall of 1956. The series was aimed at a broad public: the second edition in 1958 was planned to number 100,000 copies.<sup>6</sup> The evidence included photographs of the lynching of party members and security officers, alleged biographies of participants linking them to the interwar élite and reports about atrocities or capitalist political programs that were supposedly taken from documents of post-1956 trials. The level of evidence, in reality, was rather uneven: photos documented real events, but they were not immune to various techniques of manipulation and many of the reports were distorted and in some cases simply fictitious. The first volume was issued in December 1956, shortly after the suppression of the revolution.

The evidence that the White Books accumulated soon after the end of the armed revolt contained a large number of photographs among the numerous testimonies and articles. A sizable proportion of them were shot by Western reporters who were in Budapest during the revolution and were published in

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5 The standard book on this subject is Ervin Hollós and Vera Lajtai, *Közársaság tér 1956* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1974). A standard communist interpretation of 1956 is János Berecz, *Ellenforradalom tollal és fegyverrel. 1956* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1969), although this book provides a somewhat different perspective and presents the revolution of 1956 as a maneuver of Western imperialism.

6 Decision of the party secretariat, 15, March 15, 1958, MNL OL M-KS 288.f. 7/2. ó.e.

leading journals such as *Time*, *Life*, *Paris Match* or *Der Spiegel*.<sup>7</sup> The photos, which generally followed the generic features of photographic war documentation, concentrated on the crowd, violence, armed groups and the ruins of the city. These photographic images played a great role in constructing for the Western public a revolution, meaning a collective social deed, out of the events of October and November 1956.<sup>8</sup> The way in which the communist observers who compiled the history of the counterrevolution regarded this documentation is eloquently reflected by the first volume of the White Books.<sup>9</sup> What dominates the volume even at first sight is the terrifying spectacle of physical violence. Photographs of bodies, beaten, tortured, executed and dismembered, appear one after another. Undoubtedly, one which depicts a young member of the communist political police stripped to the waist and hanged upside down has become one of the most telling.<sup>10</sup> The gaze of the viewer is drawn immediately to the body situated in the vertical axis of the photograph, occupying it completely from top to bottom. Subsequently one notices the figures standing in the background of the illustration. A few people are watching the victim, while others are talking to each other or paying attention to something outside the frame. The chief element of the story is clearly the tortured and hanged body. The event the photograph wants to portray is not the action of lynching, but rather the result, frozen in time: the dismembered body. The cruelty that is made impersonal and atemporal in this way is transformed into a depiction of the barbarity concealed in the depths of human soul, but which on this horrific occasion has erupted onto the surface.

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7 István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 246–47.

8 Sándor Horváth, “Kollektív erőszak és városi térhasználat 1956-ban: forradalmi terek elbeszélése,” *Múltunk* 51, no. 4 (2006): 281.

9 Seeing, like reading, has its own historicity and is itself a sociocultural product as well. On the historical methodology of examining the act of “seeing,” see Randolph Starn, “Seeing Culture in a Room for a Renaissance Prince,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 205–32; Reinhart Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 3–20; Carlo Ginzburg, “Distance and Perspective: Two Metaphors,” in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (New York: Verso, 2001), 139–56. A general methodological introduction is provided by Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

10 *Ellenforradalmi erők a magyar októberi eseményekben*, (Fehér Könyv) vol. 1 (Published by the Information Bureau of the Council of Ministers of the People’s Republic of Hungary. n. d.), 14.

The image of the corpses of fallen political-police officers laid down in a row inflicts similar effects on the observer.<sup>11</sup> No other human figure can be seen besides the dead, so the cause of death remains hidden. The subject is not human activity in this case, only its outcome. The photography that depicts the corpses of the executed in a perspectival point of view evokes the image of parallels leading to infinity: the viewer can imagine this spectacle of the dead to continue beyond the frame. The photo represents the impersonal nature of mass devastation and murderous cruelty. The stories told by the images attempt to depict violence in an abstract, allegorical manner, as illustrated by the photograph of a group assaulting a woman lying on the ground.<sup>12</sup> The gaze of the viewer is drawn to the center by the white blouse of the woman, which stands out of the gray-black background. Thus the viewer first encounters the fact of cruelty: the woman's body is surrounded by legs kicking her and hands twisting her arms. The image nonetheless remains impersonal: the faces of neither the woman nor the attackers are visible. In fact, the members of the group committing the atrocity appear below the waist, merely as a mass of bodily appendages directly carrying out the violence. At the same time, the composition is loaded with symbolic meaning related to gender: the woman's white dress evokes concepts of defenseless innocence, whereas the darkly dressed male figures surrounding her represent images of the untamed violence hidden in man. The spectacle of pure cruelty dominates the publication: within its 62 pages, the thin volume features 27 photographs of corpses, executions and other atrocities. Any logic among the photographs besides repetition is hard to detect: each illustration depicts a new instance of cruelty. The recurrent images of violence strengthen the impression of a flood of arbitrary mercilessness; the purposeless, unhindered violence evokes the notion of uncivilized barbarity. The crowd, raging wildly, showed no mercy and "bestially dismembered" its victims: one of the photographs shows a naked upper body with its head and arms removed.<sup>13</sup>

Following the June 1958 trial of Imre Nagy, who served as prime minister during the 1956 revolution, the shocking photographs of the bloodbath on Republic Square published in the first volume of the White Books come into a peculiar relationship with images of other anti-communist violence. The fifth volume of the White Books, which aimed to prove the guilt of the former prime minister, published a few such images. The first examples are placed on adjoining

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11 Ibid, 21.

12 Ibid, 13.

13 Ibid, 17. The inscription reads: "A victim whose corpse was bestially dismembered."

pages: the first page contains photographs from 1919, the second from 1956.<sup>14</sup> The photos from 1919 depict when “one of the leaders from the district of Tab was hanged in the main street of the village after the downfall of the Soviet Republic in 1919” and when “White Terrorist officers executed a peasant on the outskirts of the village of Kőröshegy.” The photos taken in 1956 show when “the counterrevolutionaries carried off József Stefkó, a border-guard lieutenant who was lying ill in the hospital, and beat him to death then hanged him upside down.” The photographs taken in 1919 focus on hanged victims placed in the vertical axis of the composition. Framing the images one can see counterrevolutionary officers either posing proudly by their victim or carefully observing the result of their activity. Both compositions thus emphasize the cold, merciless character of the counterrevolutionaries. The picture from 1956, placed next to the earlier ones, creates the impression of similarity by the commensurable composition, highlighting the hanged person in its vertical axis. The center of the image is likewise juxtaposed by a raging crowd, thereby highlighting the contrast between the defenseless victim and the cruel counterrevolutionaries.

The second examples are printed on one page: the upper one depicts the “Communists of Szekszárd in 1919,” who are “awaiting the fatal bullets of Horthy’s White Terrorists with their hands bound behind their back,” whereas the photograph below shows when “the counterrevolutionary bandits shot the surrendered soldiers from behind on Republic Square in October 1956.” Whereas the first photograph focuses on the victims of the forthcoming execution, the second one places the executioners at its center. Nonetheless, the differing compositions have a similar visual effect. The first image shows those awaiting execution—depicted as average ordinary people from all classes of society—in two rows, silently and calmly awaiting death. These two rows occupy the entire photograph, the depicted individuals facing the viewer with no visible sign of the firing squad. This photo thereby manages to emphasize the unarmed, non-violent, defenseless state of the victims, giving also an impression of innocence. The second image taken in 1956 places a group of armed insurgents on the right-hand half of the composition, while the other half is occupied by two figures: a body lying on the ground, apparently dead, and a person seemingly trying to move away with his hands held up and showing his back to the group of insurgents. The gesture of this figure creates the impression that the armed group has already shot the surrendered combatants, which, as in the previous

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14 Ibid, vol. 5, 170–71.

photograph, builds its visual message on the contrast of innocence and mercilessness.<sup>15</sup>

The photos in the White Books are not illustrations—that is to say, they are not additions to or the direct representations of events described in the texts. They are presented independently, in themselves, even for themselves. Their role is to mediate the allegedly purified reality. Photography was endowed with the particular concept of objectivity during the second half of the nineteenth century. During these years, scientists started to look for methods of observation that could be made independent of the subjective points of view determined by individual value judgment, faith or conviction, and were able to record the phenomena of the world in their pure reality. The mechanical recording of data appeared free of the fallibility of the human subject: machines do not tire, they are able to work continually without breaks and they do not make moral decisions and aesthetic judgments. Images recorded by photographic machines became the authentic representations of reality, free of subjective intervention and independent of human individuality. Photography, hence, is taken as the unquestioned evidence of objective reality: the imprint of truth beyond the human limits of perception.<sup>16</sup> Photographs are thus believed to be able to reveal those aspects of reality that sometimes remain hidden from human eyes.<sup>17</sup> The similarity of the violence revealed something essential about historical continuity for the communist editors.

The cruel, bloodthirsty White Terror in 1956 was preceded by the White Terror of Horthy and his associates. Fascists allied with criminals, former village leaders, gendarme officers, Horthy officers and Arrow Cross men attempted to attack the freedom of the Hungarian people

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15 Ibid, vol. 5, 172.

16 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” *Representations* 40 (Fall 1992): 81–128. For the emergence of photography as means of accurate and cheap recording, see John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). The myth of images made without the touch of human hands as manifestations of the ultimate truth, however, arguably looks back on a longer tradition: “In the Christian tradition this power to produce the visible without any manual technique is attributed to the direct imprint of God on cloth.” See Marie José Mondzain, “The Holy Shroud: How Invisible Hands Weave the Undecidable,” in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe–Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 324.

17 Thus, the photographs of the Shroud of Turin taken by Secondo Pia in 1898 revealed that the brownish traces on the cloth, hardly perceptible to the eye, showed on the photonegative the positive image of a male body. Peter Geimer, “Searching for Something: On Photographic Revelations” in *Iconoclasm*, 143–45.



and many brave sons of the Hungarian people. Although they felt in 1956 that they were just at the very beginning, the supporters of the fallen Horthy regime could not restrain themselves and tried to “imitate” 1919 with open White Terror.<sup>18</sup>

Communist observers thus claimed that the images of similar violence revealed an unbroken historical continuity ranging from 1919 to 1956, as if one could foresee on the photos taken after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic what would occur in 1956.<sup>19</sup> The impressive photos taken as evidence of reality, free of human subjectivity, suggested the inherent homogeneity of the counterrevolution and, thereby, blurred and diminished its actual historical transformation from the White Terror through consolidation, crisis and war, to its eventual collapse and the coming to power of the Arrow Cross. In this context, a strange but largely forgotten history of 1919 obtained new relevance.

### *History on Propaganda Films*

The physical connection between images of 1919 and 1956 directly contributed to the emergence of a genre that represented history in a particular visual way, which was turned into continuous flow of images mostly due to military propaganda movies. The Political Department of the Hungarian People’s Army regularly ordered propaganda films to boost the ethos of military duty by the means of evoking patriotic traditions throughout the entire socialist period. The canonical scheme of these films was the historical tableau that depicted in recurrent chapters the freedom fights of the Hungarian people, such as the peasant rebellion of 1514, Rákóczi’s insurrection in 1703, the war for independence in 1848–49, the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 and the victory of Soviet troops in 1945. This concept of history, which was most of all the visual display of Aladár Mód’s history book *400 év küzdelem az önálló Magyarországért* (400 Years of Struggle for an Independent Hungary),<sup>20</sup> was easily recognizable in works recorded after 1956. The message of the film *Szabadságharcos elődeink* (“Our Freedom Fighter

18 Nagy Imre és bűntársai ellenforradalmi összeesküvése (Fehér könyv), vol. 5. (Published by the Information Bureau of the Council of Ministers of the People’s Republic of Hungary. n. d.), 139.

19 According to Georges Didi-Huberman, photography was regarded as evidence of events to come. The photographic process, which was more sensitive than human eyes, could detect deep features of the object that foreshadowed future events, e.g., the symptoms of future mental illness in a photo of the insane, the crime to be committed in a portrait of the criminal. See Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA–London: MIT Press, 2003), 33.

20 Aladár Mód, *400 év küzdelem az önálló Magyarországért* (Budapest: Szikra, 1951).

Predecessors”) from 1958 was to highlight German imperialism as the main threat against Hungarian freedom. The directors contrasted this menace with the longing for freedom of the people which they supported by showing recurrent episodes of freedom fights. The film focused on the crucial role the people played in these struggles, which it intended to illustrate from historical costume dramas and mass spectacles taken from documentaries recorded in 1919 and 1945.<sup>21</sup>

This tradition was continued by the film titled *Az eskü* (“The Oath”), which was shot in 1962.<sup>22</sup> This work is a feature film about the oaths taken by an army unit. The main character in the movie is a captain who has to take over the duty of managing the procedure due to the abrupt departure of his superior. After the commander leaves the barracks, the captain is left to meditate alone in the commander’s office. The camera centers on the officer’s face from a close distance, emphasizing his concentration and his uncertainty about what to say to the troops. The camera moves slowly around the captain, suggesting his state of mind, while the audience hears his thoughts: should he talk about his own life, his childhood, about the bitterness of day labor and privation? The camera then shows the captain from behind, positioning him in the bottom right of the frame, whereas the gaze of the audience is attracted to the portrait of Lenin fixed in the top left. The visual relationship of the soldier turning to Lenin and the Bolshevik leader looking down on the officer evokes the image of the believer asking for help from the source of knowledge.

During this scene, the captain meditates on the importance of the oath for a soldier left to his own devices. The significance of the oath is confirmed by his own example: in the next cut the officer remembers his personal experiences from October 1956. His task was to deliver a freight train to a barracks, however it seems impossible due to the railway workers’ strike. Meanwhile, armed “counterrevolutionaries” gather around the train. While the main character negotiates with the railway workers, the armed men try to get a hold of the train’s load. Nonetheless, the soldiers guarding the wagons defend the train, following the command of their oath, even in the absence of their actual commander.

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21 Collection of military propaganda films of the Museum of Military History. HL 10010. OSA VHS no. 66.

22 *Az eskü* (The Oath), 1962. Collection of military propaganda films of the Museum of Military History. HL 10038. OSA VHS no. 39. The following book provided profound assistance in reading cinematic language: James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media and Multimedia: Language, History, Theory* (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Memories from 1956 provide the moment of enlightenment: in one stroke they elucidate the meaning of the oath—to be faithful to the idea—while at the same time they also reveal the sense of Hungarian history—a continuous struggle between the tyranny of the masters and the oppressed people. The retrospective of 1956 evokes, one after the other, the memories of the historical past. The scene of 1956, by the means of a quick cut, imitating the rhythm of abruptly flashing memories, is followed by a series of graphics from the well-known Hungarian Communist artist Gyula Derkovits depicting György Dózsa, leader of the great peasant revolt in 1514. The film generates the impression of a story occurring in time by the means of images merging into each other and panning the camera within individual frames. The captain's interpretive commentary—as if it is the voice of the person who is remembering—qualifies this visual movement as instances of the antagonism between master and peasant. The process of recollection connects the individual historical events: following the meditation of the officer the spectator learns that Dózsa's downfall in reality represented an alarm signal for Rákóczi's cavalry (anti-Habsburg rebels in the early eighteenth century). The scene depicting Rákóczi's war of independence emphasizes the common descent of the rebels, their reluctance to fight in the service of noble commanders and enthusiasm in the camp for the popular leader Bottyán.

By evoking these memories of history, the captain draws the conclusion that the Hungarian Jacobin conspirators (a small republican conspiracy influenced by the French revolution), although they followed Rákóczi's rebels in the series of popular freedom fights, made one step forward and pursued this struggle for the republic. Memories of Habsburg oppression follow the execution of the Jacobins in the film. Historical scenes depict the sufferings of the people, then the revolutionary crowd in Pest taking an oath of freedom in 1848. The Hungarian Soviet Republic appears in the film as a chapter in these popular freedom fights. Images evoking the event show a popular festival, thus emphasizing the joy felt by the proclamation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which are succeeded by images of battle and speeches exhorting the people to fight. The part that represents the dictatorship of the proletariat corresponds to the tension reflecting the state of mind of the captain: the scene continues with a quick cut to the officer stepping up to the speaker's platform. The period subsequent to the Hungarian Soviet Republic appears as the age of darkness and suffering in the film. The images depicting the Horthy era show the execution of two captive men accompanied by gendarmes. The captain's voice, occupying position of

narrator, calls attention to the idea that during this dark age the power of the people was defended by the communists, who then guaranteed its victory after the Second World War. The concluding message of the film is that it is the task of future generations to defend this power.

*Az eskeü* consists of long scenes and a limited number of cuts: the slow, relaxed tempo of nostalgic recollection provides the rhythm of the film. The captain's role as narrator renders the contemporary perspective of 1956 in order to guarantee the abstract historical framework for memories. The practice of the film in evoking the past apparently follows the method of the historian: following the gathering of data concerning the event under scrutiny, the interpretation of the entire occurrence begins. The apparent purpose of historical investigation is Marxist analysis: to investigate the meaning of history in general based on individual events. The documentary-like moving pictures are meant to guarantee the authenticity of the historical account. These frames provide recognizably distinct spectacles to the visual settings of the overall story: whereas the scenes showing the hesitation of the captain are based on fluid shots typical of the 1960s and a relatively low-key acting performance, the images evoking the past consist of fragmented shots which bring the archaic impressions and expressive acting style to the foreground. Clearly, the film is designed for impact, as if the past has been reconstructed from contemporary sources, like a documentary. In fact, the authorities encouraged the production of films on the period that applied documentary techniques.

The guiding light of the 1963 historical documentary film *Elárult ország* ("Country Betrayed"), which aimed to depict the political elite of the interwar Horthy administration, is provided by portraits of Regent Miklós Horthy and Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös situated next to each other.<sup>23</sup> The narrator explains these images, calling Gömbös the catalyst for the German imperial alliance who subsequently led the country into disaster. Following an abrupt cut, the film continues with Mihály Francia Kiss's trial in 1957. The appearance of this judicial process secures the function of 1956, similarly to *Az eskeü*, as the point of departure for historical reconstruction and the fixing of the fall of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic as the turning point in history. The historical conception is similar as well: according to the film, the Hungarian ruling classes

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23 *Elárult ország* [Country Betrayed], 1963, dir. László Bokor. Collection of military propaganda films of the Museum of Military History. HL 3058–3060. OSA VHS no. 64.

had been pursuing opportunistic policies due to their fear of the people since 1849, which resulted in the service to German imperialism.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic was depicted as a significant episode of this historical struggle conceived in terms of social conflicts. The documentary titled *Landler Jenő: A forradalom jogásza* (“Jenő Landler: The Lawyer of the Revolution”) attempted to render this statement plausible.<sup>24</sup> The work represents Landler’s activity in the labor movement, the culmination of which was his rise to the command of the Hungarian Red Army in 1919, using various photographs instead of contemporary moving images. The film is composed of slowly panning camera movements, which imitate the slow, contemplating gaze of an observer immersed in the surrounding social world. The movement of the camera represents the meticulous scrutiny of society, making it clear that the represented historical processes are to be understood as the result of various social components. According to the film, this societal surrounding is marked by tension and social conflict, illustrated by images of light and darkness. The documentary describes the story of society hastening into revolution by means of photographs depicting striking and demonstrating crowds, making the Hungarian Soviet Republic tangible as a social revolution.

The film *Elárult ország* tries to integrate this narrow historical interpretation into a broader context. The work clearly meets the formal criterion for documentaries to use cuts from various contemporary films. The logic of the visual display evokes the perspective of an objective observer, thereby putting the cinematic documents forward as evidence for investigation.<sup>25</sup> The shaping of the Austro–Hungarian and German militarist political alliance is represented by images of military inspection and units from the end of the nineteenth century. The filmmakers believe they have detected the real purpose of war, depicted by images of cavalry troops put into action against workers on strike. This method is featured throughout the entire documentary: images of formal dances and hunting excursions representing the luxurious lifestyle and irresponsible behavior of the political élite and ruling classes are juxtaposed by visual displays of privation and oppression. Shots taken of birth and death registers, intended to demonstrate mortality by means of evoking the concepts of archives and statistics, reinforce the aura of documentary-like historical authenticity.

24 *Landler Jenő: A forradalom jogásza* [Jenő Landler: Lawyer of the Revolution], dir. János Lestár. Collection of military propaganda films of the Museum of Military History. HL 3204–3205. OSA VHS no. 66.

25 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 18–29.

At first sight, there is nothing extraordinary in this practice. As if communist propagandist-historians are interested in the same questions as every other historian: how was the state of his or her point of view formed? What were the historical processes that led to the conditions of the present?<sup>26</sup> Communists saw their present determined by the conflict of revolution and counterrevolution. Historians hence behaved as if they were searching for the historical origins of this struggle, believing that they had discovered its archetypal event in the history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In order to find answers to the question, partisan scholars imitated the method of investigation: they pretended to look for sources that would answer their questions and might reveal the secrets of the past. During their investigation these propagandist-historians acted as if they had been exploiting their sources as clues: based upon these clues researchers pretended to deduce what past occurrences the remnants reflected, creating the impression that it had been the reading of evidence that shaped the narrative.

The ideological framing of the narratives, however, confined historical sources to a curious role in representations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The editing techniques of *Elárult ország* are marked by rapid shifts of sharply cut frames, which make the profound encounter and working with the presented documents barely possible. In fact, by applying this method the film specifically attempts to hinder a comprehensive and profound understanding of history. The short, rapidly changing images and simple narration following this rhythm are aimed at stirring emotions: contrapuntal frames quickly follow each other, leading the audience towards emotional identification with the oppressed. The film is ostensibly a documentary, though is in fact a propaganda work, the primary goal of which is the deconstruction of critical distance from the message, suppressing the voice of contradictory evidence. The real purpose of the procession of images is actually nothing less than to justify emotional proximity and to simultaneously suspend critical distance.

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26 The importance of the questions of the historian in shaping the plot and the narrative has been argued by various scholars with many different backgrounds and interests, e.g., Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vols. 1–3 (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1984–85), esp. 52–87. See also Ricoeur’s “Narrative Time,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 169–90.; and “The Narrative Function,” in idem, *Hermeneutics and The Human Sciences* (Cambridge–Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 274–96. This last piece is basically a summary of the three volumes. See also Christopher R. Browning, “German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction in Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 31; and also the early piece by Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5 (1966): 111–34.

*Elárult ország* tells the story of the interwar period by means of corresponding frames on Hungarian politics and German military preparations succeeding one another, which makes it possible to represent these historical events, otherwise lacking sufficient narrative explanation, as being parallel occurrences. A typical example of this practice is the quick, sharp cuts between scenes that depict recordings of the Nuremberg NS Party days and Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös of Hungary in national-style festive costume. The Hungarian foreign policy of the 1930s thereby entered into a direct relationship with the goals of Nazi politics without any particular explanation or justification. Another scene that juxtaposes the Hungarian rearmament program of the 1930s with the German–Austrian *Anschluss* plays a similar role. Corresponding parallel images, thus, integrate contemporary Hungarian politics into the context of German imperial expansion without any profound historical investigation. Images edited next to each other in these Hungarian military propaganda films summon a sense of affinity and elicit particular historical associations. The similarity of spectacle connects the historical events, persons and data depicted by these pictures, while the temporal succession of moving images transforms them into a narrative.

The spectacle of this historical continuity features the memorial exhibition opened on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which was organized by the Trade Union of Railway Workers. The workers wanted to install a genuine historical exhibition representing the past by means of original documents. According to this intention, clearly visible on preserved photographs, some boards did not simply show copies of contemporary historical sources, but the actual documents themselves stuck to the boards in their physical entirety. The volume titled *The Establishment of Organizations*, which describes the history of the railway workers' trade unions in between the wars, was put on display to be opened and browsed through by the visitors (Fig. 1).

This direct encounter with the traces of the past, however, concealed the fact that, rather than being an accurate descriptive explanation, the sequence of the display defined the nature of the relationship among these historical documents. The exposition made its objects available for the public in a montage-like arrangement (Fig. 2). Documents of the counterrevolution following the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic can be seen on a background made of graphical works of art. This background is dominated by a gallows tree and the figures of a gendarme and a village notary grasping a whip. These iconic images attempt to establish the existence of a deeper, profound historical continuity, though remains barely explicated. The inscription “Year 1932,” visible on boards



Figure 1: The Establishment of Organizations. Historical Photographic Records of the Hungarian National Museum 48. ME/II/B, Culture - Exhibitions 1957–1962, Registry no. 59. 525.



Figure 2: The Exhibition of Railworkers' Union for the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic. Historical Photographic Records of the Hungarian National Museum 48. ME/II/B, Culture - Exhibitions 1957–1962, Registry no. 59. 524.



representing the history of the interwar period, is succeeded by an image of the German imperial eagle, and the visual series is completed by a depiction of a Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross armband. The portrait of Hitler situated above the series of images, in turn, appears to reveal the essence of the power dominating the events in reality.<sup>27</sup> The exhibition in this way actually represented the historical allegory of counterrevolution, of downfall and continuity replacing genuine historical explanation.

### *A Look at the Evidence*

Apparently, historical representations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic that followed the party line put very little emphasis on the establishment of critical relationships between historical evidence and narrative claims regarding the past. Documentary films commissioned by the authorities in general were not interested in creating particular indexical relationships with reality, where images mediate the authentic sense of being there and of direct experience by means of accurate references to the represented actions and events.<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, historical works in printed media seem to disregard the traditional function of the footnote as a method of critical reflection on the sources of knowledge on the past. Historians ordinarily are expected to go to the archives, dig up sources and reveal their findings, together with the process of investigation, to the public. Hungarian communist-party historians ignored the fact that footnotes does not simply claim that the evidence exists, but also prove that the historian was there, meeting and working with the records, and has drawn conclusions from the direct experience with them. These works on 1919 had no concern for turning footnotes into tools for demonstrating the outcomes of obligatory critical work and testifying to the ability of the historian.<sup>29</sup> All these expectations, however, place a peculiar status of uncertainty upon the historian: he or she is required to reach conclusions, make claims and arguments, end the narrative and construct the ending of the plot structure together with its broader moral, political and cultural implications after meticulous engagement with the evidence. Since no pool of sources is entire and no interpretations

27 Historical Photographic Records of the Hungarian National Museum 48. ME/II/B, Box: Culture: Exhibitions 1957–1962. Registry no.: 59.523.

28 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 108–18.

29 Anthony Grafton, “The Footnote from de Thou to Ranke,” *History and Theory* 33 (December 1994): 53–76; Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 96.

are final, there is always a certain level of uncertainty in the historian's work. Historians are inherently dependent on the contingent collection of archives and the uncertainty of evidence. Historical authenticity rests on the certainty of uncertainty: an accurate description of inaccuracy and absences of evidence and a sincere declaration of the reasons why a particular interpretation is preferred. The intention of demonstrating evidence in these historical representations was not to reflect uncertainty by answering questions: on the contrary, the use of historical records was aimed at illustration of the given certainty of abstract prescribed statements on the past.

In fact, the manipulation of historical authenticity is detectable behind the appearance of authentic historical representation: the evocation of the past in works which call themselves historical documentaries aims to create effects similar to those in historical costume dramas. Obviously, the majority of historical scenes represented by moving images could not be produced according to original documents. In *Az eskü*, the peasant rebellion of 1514 is depicted by art graphics, while the Rákóczi insurrection of 1703–11 and the war for independence in 1848–49 are shown by frames from a feature film produced in the 1950s.<sup>30</sup> The proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the struggles of the Red Army are illustrated by contemporary documentary shots; however, the fall of the dictatorship is depicted by images from a feature film. Historical feature film, however, is a particular genre: it represents the events of the past overwhelmingly via individual fates and trajectories. Individual deeds stand in the focus of historical processes, while social conflicts and ruptures are conceived through individual mental and emotional reactions.<sup>31</sup> Historical dramas do not present historical evidence for the spectators in order to drive them to consider, come to terms with and perform interpretive work with these proofs. The ability of historical feature films is to encourage emotional identification with abstract, positively depicted forces and values symbolized by the events of the past by means of establishing particular relationships to individual characters.

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30 1848 was represented by images taken from the well-known historical drama *Föltámadott a tenger* [The Whole Sea Has Revolted].

31 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen, Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlem–London: Pearson Education, 2006), 15, 38–48; Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

It is as if the construction of narratives about the past, namely historical interpretation, was the result of an imagination independent of reading the sources. Apparently, historians willing to meet the official expectations of the party considered historical research to be the value- and interpretation-free activity of selecting and collecting facts from an unprocessed historical field that had nothing to do with genuine historical understanding. As if evidence could automatically establish, by the mere virtue of its existence, a relationship with reality. As if historical evidence constituted a positive store of facts, independent of and unchanged by the interpreter, but which was at the historian's disposal to be selected freely according to the needs of demonstration.<sup>32</sup>

The most important criterion determining the authenticity of historical interpretations, as György Lukács claims in his treatise on the historical novel published in Russian in 1937 and in Hungarian in 1947, is that they are able to represent the tendencies of development shaping the present. The Marxist philosopher expects historical novels to demonstrate how society developed into its contemporary form and which historical processes determined its contemporary state:

Without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible. But this relationship, in the case of really great historical art, does not consist in alluding to contemporary events, but in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical, social and human forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it.<sup>33</sup>

Lukács believes that precisely because the purpose of historical representations is to detect processes leading to the present, many historically relevant tendencies reveal themselves only for the retrospective gaze into the past. Numerous components of the historical development remained hidden for contemporaries, which, nonetheless, became recognizable for succeeding observers. Lukács, however, is searching for more than the relevance of historical explorations as tools to understand the present. The Marxist philosopher is arguing that since the genuine essence of historical reality is made of those

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32 On the distinction of narrative interpretation and positive factual historical data in contemporary historical theory, see Martin Jay, "Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgements," in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 91–107; Chris Lorenz, "Can Histories Be True?" *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (1998): 287–309.

33 Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 53.

processes which lead towards the present, this reality becomes accessible through an adequate assessment of the present. The appropriate understanding of the historical process is dependent on the correct moral-political commitment and cultural-ideological consciousness of the observer-interpreter of the past. The purpose of authentic historical representation, thus, is to document the process of historical necessity as understood retrospectively:

Measured against this authentic reproduction of the real components of historical necessity, it matters little whether individual details, individual facts are historically correct or not. [...] Detail is only a means for achieving the historical faithfulness here described, for making concretely clear the historical necessity of a concrete situation.<sup>34</sup>

To be a faithful representation of reality, one must depict the hidden essence of things, the theory of socialist realism teaches. As its philosophy claims, the hidden, but real essence and meaning of History or Reality reveals itself in its typical manifestations. However, to recognize and understand the typical, one must practice a certain form of self-discipline: one must learn not to trust his or her eyes, since the eyes, according to socialist realist criticism, reflect only objects as they visibly appear, but tell little about the truly important factors of human consciousness and cognition, which is accessible only by thought. For the philosophy of socialist realism, the visible observable qualities of objects—facts—are only part of the truth, more precisely, these are raw material which genuine representation must learn to use and even use creatively in order to discern the inessential and the typical. But how to establish what is important and what is not? The typical, according to the theory of socialist realism, is not marked by its regular appearance or majority. The typical is rather the crucial process which is just emerging to determine the further course and meaning of History. Therefore, reality is to be recognized not by considering the visible and the observable, but by contemplating the yet invisible and hidden. A certain element of prediction and fortune-telling is involved in this process, which could make faithful representation impossible if there was no guiding light in seeing the future. If it is the political center, the party that shapes the future, launches the processes to emerge and defines what the typical is, then true representation must understand, depict and follow political visions and objectives.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Ibid. 59.

35 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 50–54.

## Conclusions

Propagandist-historians regarded the form of historical representation that they constructed as having incorporated evidence into a comprehensive and comprehensible narrative, and thus they saw it as being capable of supporting their political project, effectively representing the “truth” of communism.<sup>36</sup> Communist propagandist-historians seemed to consider the authenticity of historical accounts to be the result of the success of representing cultural-philosophical concepts by means of various forms of art. The artificial division of the interpretation of sources and the creative narrative process had convinced them that the validity and credibility of historical interpretation was bound to coherent narratives embedded in a cultural context of narrative tradition. Communist authorities shaping the politics of history tended to believe that the credibility of historical representations was grounded if they acquired meaning as narratives. The validity of historical interpretation was well-founded if it was related to a culturally accessible set of narratives. They expected readers to perceive the correspondence between narrative forms and genres, whereas the form of the particular historical account was to remind them of those kinds of story structures which generally were already available in society.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the abstract history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic remained deeply doubtful. Instead of accurate references to particular individual phenomena, these works referred to general moral and cultural positions in order to draw (political) lessons and provide judgment. As a consequence of this use of evidence to invoke moral judgment, political commitment or ideological notions, the abstract narrative of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was conceived as it really was: a means to cover and conceal the

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36 Hayden White assumes that the truth of historical interpretations can be measured according to the effectiveness with which these are able to support various political projects that enhance the security of communities: “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 58–83.

37 Narrativist historical theory describes genuine historical interpretation as an activity of relating accounts on the past to narrative traditions: Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 51–80; Louis O. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument,” in *The Writing of History*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 143–4. Departing from this point, Hayden White calls the narrative account an inherently figurative account that endows real events with meaning by poetic means: “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” in *The Content of The Form*, 26–57; Frank R. Ankersmit, “Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History,” in *History and Topology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 40–41.

fact that the communist fighters of 1919 had directly or indirectly contributed to the suffering of those people who were opponents or obstructions to their program of political and social transformation.<sup>38</sup> These representations of the past appeared to be tools of a particular “rhetoric against the evidence”: the rhetorical means of suppressing evidence.<sup>39</sup> Communist representations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic represented no evidential paradigm, no mode of reading the evidence, but realized an artistic modality: fiction that transformed the evocation of reality into aesthetic quality to reflect abstract world views, moral structures or ideological constructions. The mode of uploading evidence into prefigured narrative constructs made the representations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic appear as they really were: fictions exploiting original documents to illustrate the abstract fictive concept of the counterrevolution.

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38 Communist paramilitaries executed several hundred people for “counterrevolutionary” activity. Exact details will probably never be available. Péter Gosztonyi, *A magyar Golgota* (Budapest: Heltai Gáspár Kft., 1993), 24–30; Péter Konok, “Az erőszak kérdései 1919–1920-ban. Vörösteror–fehérterror,” *Múltunk* 55, no. 3 (2010): 72–91; István I. Mócsy, *The Effects of World War I* (New York: Social Science Monographs, 1983), 99, 102; Nicholas Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1970), 24–25. The source of statistics is usually the following two books, which are equally overstated and imprecise: Albert Váry, *A vörös uralom áldozatai Magyarországon* (Budapest: Légrédy, 1922); and Vilmos Böhm, *Két forradalom tüzeiben* (Munich: Népszava, 1923).

39 Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric and Proof* (Hanover, NH–London: University Press of New England, 1999), 5.

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