

Imperialism Tolling the Bells of Nemesis: A Traumatic Holiday and its Impact on Hungarian Thought

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Abstract

April 4th was, until 1990, a holiday of Hungary's liberation. This paper argues that the history of this holiday, and the contrast of its celebration and later cancellation, presents a cross-section of Hungary's traumas of the 20th century, one which still informs contemporary political debates and political thought.

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I. A Liberation Day?

It all started with a last German attack. While the first mild days approached in the spring of 1945, the Third Reich and its half-dead ally, Hungary, tried to reclaim the Southern part of the Transdanubian region in what proved to be the last large-scale offensive by the Axis in the Second World War. It lasted only three days, from March 12 to March 15, 1945. The handful of operational armoured vehicles ran out of fuel or bogged down in the soft ground around Sárbogárd and Kaposvár, the air cover of the Luftwaffe was non-existent, and the Soviets were legion. And as the Axis advance got stuck, the Soviet counterblow arrived. The Soviet's 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts smashed into the depleted ranks of the German-Hungarian forces. After a couple of days of desperate fighting, the German-Hungarian lines were ripped open, and the Soviets were pouring toward the Western border on the heels of the fleeing Axis forces.¹ On April 4th, the Red Army announced the total liberation of Hungary.² Thus began the history of a Hungarian holiday, which was celebrated for almost 45 years and quite literally defined the face of the country. In a way, it still does.

If you stroll out along the banks of the Danube on a nice Sunday afternoon in Budapest, anywhere in the centre and its vicinity, you can't miss the enormous female silhouette of the Freedom Statue towering on Gellért Hill. It was constructed originally in celebration of this very liberation, carving the message into the Budapest skyline. The statue remained after 1989 as a symbol of a universally celebrated idea, but one of its companion statues disappeared. Originally, a young-looking Soviet trooper stood at the base of the statue with a prominent flag, evoking a connection between liberty and the Soviet army, which supposedly completed liberation from the Germans and their puppets on April 4th.³

In the first place, this very emphasis on Soviet force caused the Hungarian Liberation Day to differ from other European commemorations of the end of the Second World War. A conscious decision was made to place these countries into a history emphasizing not the impact of the war and the Allied victory in general but the specific actions of the Soviet army in their countries. Romania celebrated August 23, when the country's government turned against Germany in

¹ See a historical overview at: Péter Szabó – Norbert Számvéber: A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943 – 1945 Püldo, Budapest, 2009, 197. [Digital Edition](#) at Arcanum.

² See contemporary reports at: „Egész Magyarország felszabadult” *Szabad Nép* 1945.04.05

³ See a very informative discussion of the statue (and its human models) at [Tönkretette a saját modelljét a Gellért-hegyi Szabadság-szobor](#) by Vincze Miklós at 24.hu

1944, opening up the Reich's southern flank. And Hungary celebrated the day of the Soviet announcement about its full "liberation."

The holiday was officially recognized in the official calendar in 1949, but the first celebrations apparently occurred in 1945 already, not on April 4th but on the 8th, spontaneously and from the part of left-wing groups.⁴ In the following years, April 4th became a staple date for remembering a new start for Hungary across the left-wing press. In 1947, a big step was made with the inauguration of the statue following the direct orders of Soviet occupation authorities on April 4th.

However, the statue of the soldier is now standing at Parque Memento, among many other Socialist-era statues. With it, the holiday became a thing of the past, which met, we can say, universal acceptance among the Hungarian population. The holiday was part of the official calendar until 1989. In 1990, public figures of all colors (except Communist ones) celebrated the cancellation of the holiday in unison. The greatest spontaneous celebration of the 1990s in relation to Soviet soldiers came when the Soviet Army finished its withdrawal from Hungary on June 16, 1991.

But why is that? How did such a holiday disappear into oblivion? The celebration, at first glance, fits into the pattern of the recognition of V-Day on May 8/9 among Western nations, the end of World War 2 in Europe after the Reims capitulation of Wehrmacht forces. This victory over the Third Reich is a well-recognised civilisational milestone in the West which rightly constitutes a point of historical and moral reference to this very day. In Hungary, however, the end of the war and the liberation from Nazism and its vassals meant the start of another set of travails, that of the Soviets and their own vassals. But how and why did the idea of the end of World War II become so intertwined with conquest and totalitarianism?

II. Felszaba-dúlás⁵

"I am big communist! - I told him in broken Russian.

- I am not - said the Russian and took my wristwatch off with a well-honed move."

Ephraim Kishon: Hogy volt? A nagy lebógés oknyomozó története

⁴ See contemporary reports at: „Népgyűlés a Nemzeti Múzeum előtt” *Népszava* 1945.04.08, 1,3.

⁵ wordplay which resists translation, based the Hungarian words felszabadulás – liberation and dúlás – plunder

The phenomenon of liberation, as it happened in the West, differed a great deal from the lived experience of the Soviet takeover. Of course, the core experience was that the sovereign army of Hungary was defeated in battle and forced to give up the national territory. However, it did not necessarily contradict the idea of “liberation,” as we will see, but the manner how it happened was highly problematic.

The main point of contention was the behaviour of Soviet troops. The quote above is from Ephraim Kishon, later a famous satirist in Israel, who describes his first experience with Soviet soldiers during the liberation of Budapest. The frontline troops behaved in a way that made it almost unfathomable for Hungarians to see them as liberators. Petty robbery such as the collection of wristwatches was just a footnote: the mass rape of Hungarian women was so widespread that it has become a commonplace in contemporary historiography.

For some, the thirst of revenge of the Soviet soldiers could be explained as being rooted in their savage experience of war. Kristóf Berta, a Hungarian historian, reflecting on the atrocities committed in the vicinity of Budapest in late December 1944, uncovered the operational history of the specific Soviet unit responsible for the atrocities at the village of Héreg as reflected in Soviet archival sources, and found that the unit was in constant action since January 1944, when the Soviet offensive in Central Ukraine started.⁶ These soldiers arriving into the neat little villages of the Pilis and Gerecse mountains of Hungary lived through the crossing of the Dnieper in late 1943, the Dniester offensive of early 1944, the August offensive into Romania, and finally, the autumn and winter offensive through Hungary. Large mechanized battles, close-quarter fighting, river crossings under enemy fire, constantly over the course of a year. The brutal effects of this on the soldiers are hard to even imagine. This brutalized mass arrives in Hungary, in turn, where, despite the horrors of the Holocaust and the bombings, the middle class still wanted to guard at least a semblance of peacetime normality. The wholesale, small-time plunder of Hungarian households is dwarfed by the horrors of this mass rape wave. Instead of the liberating hero that stood for many years at the base of the Liberty Statue, the stereotypical figure across fictitious and non-fiction reflections on the Soviet military operations in Hungary was a drunk Russian soldier, his arm covered with stolen watches, preying on Hungarian women. The Soviets made a war machine that was able to beat Hitler's military on the battlefield, which was a historical feat. They couldn't have their cake and eat it

⁶ Kristóf Berta: “Magyar Zoltán búcsúlevele hadtörténész szemmel” in.: Kincses Katalin (szerk.): *A levél mint történelmi forrás*. Károli Gáspár University, Budapest, 2022, 253-261

at the same time, however. This was a force made singularly for destruction, and as it rammed through Hungary and other Central European countries, it made the notion of liberation sound like a dark joke.

Not only did the rampant destruction and plunder of the Red Army rage through Hungary but it was followed by Soviet punishment of even more organized and sinister forms. The Soviet Union was in shambles by the end of the war. Manpower, infrastructure, and resources depleted, the country faced a new age of great-power competition with meagre capabilities. One method to make up for it was to force the defeated to turn over resources. This came in two forms. One was the heavy payment of “restitution,” which ranged from consumer goods to industrial resources to hard cash, in a way that hamstrung all post-war Central European societies that fell under the category of the “defeated.” The other was, quite frankly, requisitioning manpower. Axis prisoners of war had been working for the rebuilding of the Soviet Union since wartime, but Central Europe was hit after the Cold War with a campaign that can be best described as a raid of slaves. Officially termed “internment,” civilians were rounded up at random and transported to labour camps in the Soviet Union for years. The comprehensive, quantitative impact of this – the number of prisoners, their origin, and the length of the slavery years – is still the subject of intensive research in Hungary,⁷ but it is clear that it was hundreds of thousands that were transported to the Soviet Union for slave labour. Put this alongside the 300,000 people killed in the war, and the more than 500,000 victims of the Holocaust committed by Hungarians and Germans, and it is clear that no group, almost to say no family of Hungarian society, was left untouched by the series of massacres and displacements of the Second World War. The so-called “Liberation Day” meant no clear break from this national trauma.

There was no helping hand offered with the liberation, either, that could differentiate. The Marshall Plan of the United States did not reach Central Europe, as the Soviets guarded their new acquisitions jealously and wanted no economic incursions from the West. While Western Europe was reconstructed and its development funded, Central Europe was looted, and financial help was turned away at the whims of the Soviet imperialists. This impacted the meaning of Liberation Day in a predictable way.

Later, the Soviets offered loans and other economic aid to their vassal republics, Hungary included, when their economies became unstable, so the colonial relationship was not always

⁷ See for example: Zalán Bognár: *Gupvi, Gulág - Magyarok a szovjet lágerbirodalomban*. International Society of Gulag and Gupvi Researchers, Budapest, 2020

one-sided financially. The discounted fossil fuels flowing from the USSR kept most socialist regimes on life support throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Still, the merciless looting in the hour of maximum need remained a memory that was hard to reconcile with a supposed liberation.

III. Derailing Liberation

And yet, there were still elements that had the potential of salvaging Liberation Day as a consensually positive holiday for the Hungarian memory. The day in which the front left Hungary was a historical turning point in which some awaited a new and potentially more just future. László Németh, a prominent writer of the *népi* (popular, folkish - a hard-to-translate reference to the concentration of this group to understand Hungarian folk and popular culture and to aim for rejuvenation on these values) strain of Hungarian literature already called for post-war-Hungary-to a place of progressive modernity in his famous speech delivered on a conference at Balatonszárszó on August 29, 1943. *“I can see clearly (it would be strange if I was the one not to see it) how big woes are held by the coming months: nevertheless, there is a huge opening appeared at the same time for Hungarians to order their life according to its nature, following the plans of its best thinkers, for the good of ever-larger masses.”*⁸ The war deeply scarred Hungary, from the Allied bombing campaign through huge military losses to the horrors of the Holocaust, destruction and plunder by the Soviet army, while the German puppet Arrow Cross government massacred Jews and political enemies behind the other frontline. The liberation of the Budapest ghetto, while not a publicly recognized date, is still remembered as a day of deliverance. The end of these horrors (in any way) was a net positive event for the country indeed. Communists tried to link this event to their view of history, merging an event of historical importance into Communist mythology in a way that became almost indistinguishable for many people. With this, two feats were achieved: making a foundational myth for the Hungarian Communists and, at the same time, placing this myth in a geographical sphere: the point was not only vertical class warfare but the “liberation from imperialism/colonialism.

The foundational myth was needed because, in the case of Eastern Europe, the classic Marxist-Leninist prescription for political transformation was not followed. The Socialist regimes that came into being by the end of the 1940s could generally point out that they “trod their own

⁸ Translated by the author, source: László Németh: Második szárszói beszéd. Accessible at [MEK](#). *Látom persze én is (s furcsa volna, ha éppen én nem látnám), hogy akármilyen nagy megnyomorodást tartogatnak számunkra a most jövő hónapok: ugyanakkor óriási rés is nyílt, hogy a magyarság a maga természete s legjobb gondolkodóinak a tervei szerint, minél nagyobb tömegek javára rendezze be az életét.*

path” by pushing out the transitional regimes, but it was clearly recognized by the parties themselves that they were the fruit of the Soviet domination over the region. It is quite enlightening that no Eastern Communist party celebrated the date when they took over the government of their respective countries, but they all celebrated their own nation’s “liberation day” with the Soviet Army.

The detour from the original prescription still needed to be explained, as Marxism-Leninism claimed to follow the development of societies organically and install a Communist-dominated only when the society itself was ripe for it. It needed first a “bourgeois revolution,” which was to inaugurate capitalist development from the ashes of feudalism. Then, rising contradictions were supposed to form inside the new capitalist society, between the capitalists and exploited labor groups, then (an element that Lenin added to the mythology) a vanguard party of Communists was needed to lead these masses into victory and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In this framework, the Soviet conquest needed an extra explanation as to how it fit Hungarian (or other Central/Eastern European) development as prescribed by Marxist dialectics. Of course, it was not unprecedented. The Soviets themselves retook several former Russian-ruled territories, some by then independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, by brute military force in 1920-21.⁹ This was explained away as “helping” supposed local communist forces to achieve their revolution. A similar recipe was then applied to East-Central Europe. The need for help was explained not only in the simple logic of defeating Hitler but also by the supposedly “semi-feudal” state of Central Europe before the Soviet conquest. According to the theory, they were kept in this state by the West, which used them as quasi-colonies as of the framework of Lenin’s 1914 essay, “Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism.” The Soviet liberation/takeover in 1944-45 was, therefore, not about sparking the Socialist revolution but making the natural development of these societies possible.¹⁰ Because of this, these new, Communist-dominated states took a special nomenclature, “people’s republics” instead of “Socialist republics.”¹¹ The integration of the day of liberation into Hungarian history solved two important issues for Communists: it served as a justification for the Socialist domination of Central Europe and, at the same time, the Soviet imperial domination.

⁹ See a recent summary of the topic: Smele, Jonathan D.: *The „Russian” Civil Wars, 1916-1926 – Ten Years that Shook the World*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁰ Lenin, V.I.: *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Find a digital copy on [Marxist Internet Archive](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-cap/) as published in *Lenin’s Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1963, Moscow, Volume 1, pp. 667-766.

¹¹ For an analysis of the distinction see Melinda Kalmár: *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjetrendszer*

With the aspect of “liberation of colonial rule,” we can turn to the spatial anchoring of this new holiday. The liberation was not just from dead-end development but specifically from German domination. The anxiety of the encroaching German civilisation was alive and well in Hungarian imagination, not the least since the early 19th-century national revival- The presence – both rural and urban – of German groups in Hungary, the fact that the Habsburg elite was predominantly German was a living dilemma for Hungarian groups that sought their future in a country where Hungarian culture was to dominate. The forced Germanisation of Hungary by the Habsburgs was a constant fear up to the 1860s when a settlement was made between the power centers of Vienna and Budapest, giving broad autonomy to Hungary in the newly constructed “Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.” The fear of German as something alien and uncomfortable found its way into high literature as well. “*Dust, stench, German chatter, and dirt*” summarised his uncomfortable experience of Pest the revered national poet János Arany in the 1870s. After Hungary gained special status inside the Habsburg monarch in 1867, these fears were alleviated. However, the assertive cultural campaign of assimilation of nationalities was partly informed by these concepts of strengthening the nation in the face of external cultural and imperial encroachment.

The Habsburg imperial center fell – along with the old Hungarian Kingdom – in 1918, but with the revival of German imperialism in the 1930s, these fears of German power returned and multiplied. *Give Hungarianness to Hungary/So we won't be a colony of Germany*¹² wrote the revered poet Attila József in his famed poem *Hazám* in 1937, warning about the consequences of the perceived disintegration of Hungarian society into privileged and pauperized groups. Communists played on the history of these fears as a way to explain why the Soviet takeover differs from the host of external conquests that Hungary was subjected to throughout its history. The West, embodied by the Germans, was identified as the source of underdevelopment for Hungary, which malicious force was swept away eventually by the victory of April 4th.

A typical example of this combined message is the (in Hungary) well-known children's song that became the staple of the April 4th celebration. In the song, “Április négyről szóljon az ének” (Let us sing about April four) the writer (Ernő Rossa) calls on the Hungarians that “*Go on the road and don't look back/ Behind you is a pain of a thousand years*”¹³ which suggests that the celebrated past of Hungary was a dead end of history, both in a spatial and a societal

¹² Adj magyarságot a magyarnak/hogy mi ne legyünk német gyarmat...” [József Attila: Hazám at Hungarian Electronic Library](#)

¹³ Indulj az útra és vissza ne nézz/Múltad a fájó, bús ezer év

sense. But, raised the writer his metaphoric hand “*The Army of the Soviets triumphed/ And centuries of tears were wiped away*”.¹⁴ This view of Hungarian history burgeoned through the newly officialised lines of Hungarian history. The agency of the lower classes and the class struggle were forcefully inserted at every possible historical instance. Almost all peasant rebellions were inaugurated into the official curriculum, the 1514 György Dózsa rebellion primarily. Dózsa was an ideal candidate, as he led one of the biggest peasant rebellion in Hungarian history, and he did in a very important period: right before the battle of Mohács. The explanation went that the Hungarian nobles massacred the peasants instead of enlisting them into the struggle against the Ottoman Turk, thus opening the way to the catastrophe of the Mohács plain. Painting the failure of national struggles as the outcome of the crimes of the ruling class was a neat explanation. In another case, that of the Rákóczi rebellion, imagined as a class and anti-imperial struggle at once, initiated by “Rákóczi népe”, the peasant masses of the Northeast, which was then betrayed by the class interests and petty deals of the aristocratic class. Thus the “hero” of the Rákóczi age was Tamás Esze, the commoner Hajdu officer of the rebel army, while the biggest villains were Hungarians, too: László Ocskay, the cavalry general and nobleman who defected to the Austrians, and of course, the baron Sándor Károlyi, who capitulated with the Kuruc army in 1711.

The official ideology of April 4th tried to force a new understanding of Hungarian history and geopolitics, while at the same time connecting this to justifying Soviet rule. This imperialistic message was compounded by the fact that, while the Day of Liberation was widely celebrated, the classic holiday March 15 – that of the anti-Habsburg democratic revolution of 1848, which is considered the *origo* of national democratic revolutions – was played down to the level where its public commemoration was *de facto* banned.¹⁵ There was an attempt to cobble March 15th together with March 21st, the date of the first Communist takeover of Hungary in 1919, and celebrate it as “Days of Revolutionary Youth” but overall the holiday was subdued.

IV. Nasty Mythologies

But where did this aggressive approach come from? Most of the official myth and culture around this day (including the recently analysed song) was created in the early 1950s, during the darkest years of Stalinism, when Mátyás Rákosi was the First Secretary of the ruling party

¹⁴ Győzött a szovjetek hős serege/Századok könnyét így mosta le

¹⁵ For a short summary see Márk Csarnai: „[Átpolitizált ünnep – a március 15-ei ünnepségek 1945 és 1989 között](#)”

and thus de facto ruler of Hungary. This period is identified by historians as the “epic” phase of Socialist rule in the country. “Epic” in this context means that the regime wanted to show and embed a grand narrative of almost mythological proportions about the history of humanity and wanted the population to identify with this emotional storytelling. For the common man, it meant that this was the period when the now well-recognized features of totalitarian mobilization and myth-making predominated, with parades, slogans, and nauseating rhetoric. The fealty to the regime needed to be expressed in a very public and demonstrative way, in which the special holidays, mass events, public campaigns, and identification with the propaganda played a key role. April 4th was constructed to be one of such special holidays where fealty could be declared and masses could be “educated” about the new framework of reality. In this era the historical facts of the “liberation” were canonised. The story goes that the Soviet liberation started at Battonya, in present-day Csongrád on September 23, 1944, and ended on Nemesmedves, April 4, 1945.¹⁶ This was compounded with the creation of the commemorative sites in the respective places, compounded with sub-myths, like when the Nemesmedves inhabitants rang the bells on the good news that the Soviets arrived. The “Bells of Nemesmedves” paradoxically became a symbol of the new, secular salvation of Hungary, not by the Son of Man, but by the Soviet infantryman.

However, the “epic” era quickly passed, as the failed Revolution of 1956 made clear that there was no possibility of building a stable coalition behind the totalitarian performance of Communism. After the bloody Soviet crackdown, the new pact was the moderately bearable management of the country by the regime of Kádár in exchange for the Hungarians keeping in line with the Soviet will. In this environment, where the Red Army’s massacres of young Hungarians were living and direct memory, the holiday slowly became much more uneasy. Formal participation was still required, as the ideological underpinnings of the regime fundamentally remained the same, but public celebrations moved from essentially important rituals to an accepted facade. The gestures were reversed: it was not the population anymore that needed to offer its fealty to the leadership, but the other way around. The free hot meals and snacks distributed on May 1 (another important, but much more international holiday of Socialism) and the fireworks of August 20th are a well-recognised mementos of late Kádárism and its concentration of offering amenities to the population.

¹⁶ The popular representations illustrated this quite well. For example: Sándor Tóth: *Nemesmedvestől Battonyáig. Magyarország felszabadításának képes krónikája*.

However, this formal participation slowly became coarser and coarser as the years went on. April 4th was a quite militaristic holiday. For many kids, this was an event where culturally alien Soviet military songs were sung and poems evoked about the fight against German fascism. The Hungarian People's Army held its annual parade every year on this day as well until 1965. As the Cold War went on and the West became a subject of rising fascination, the emphasis on the Communist military power became more and more comical. In fact, the parade was the first that started the slow retirement of April 4th. From an annual holiday, it became a phenomenon of five-year cycles and was held in 1985 for the last time, as in 1990, democracy already arrived. The slow retirement of the parade was a sign of how April 4th became an uneasy phenomenon with all of its militaristic boastfulness.

It was not just that the classic Soviet narrative hollowed out with the construction of a moderate welfare state. The construction of the concept of Soviets as liberators of Hungary of harmful Western domination and its own semi-feudalism had an effect of perpetuating tension with the Hungarian diaspora. A huge part of Hungarians living in emigration all across the world (not the least in the Anglosphere) fled in 1945. For them, April 4th was an unacceptable holiday, as they were fleeing "the invasion of the mechanized Mongols" as they referred to a painful experience of 13th century central Europe. It was state policy for the Kádár regime as well not to let the emigration reintegrate fully, while a certain level of mobility was allowed. However, this meant that April 4th, in essence, perpetuated the traumas of the 20th century via publicly and regularly professing the blanket guilt of Hungarian World War 2 veterans. This was another layer that made the holiday inseparable from the Communist regime and unsustainable for Hungarian society.

The idea of April 4th as the inauguration of modernity was still tried and professed by the Communists to the very end. The last one was celebrated on April 4th, 1989, when negotiations with the democratic opposition were already underway, Judit Csehák, member of the Political Committee (which was the innermost official power circle) of the Hungarian Workers' Party explained on national television that April 4th needs to be a symbol of progress, in which the MSZMP still leads the way via inaugurating new societal dialogue and the dynamic of parliamentary elections. The Communists, in the end, never actually tried to seriously salvage the holiday in the democratic era. Consensus swept it away so contemptuously that there was no debate, only a couple of bureaucratic orders about April 4th becoming a regular workday again. The thunderous day of liberation simply withered away, and the Soviet infantryman statue standing guard at the foot of the Liberty Statue was duly shipped into Memento Park.

The grim and two-faced reality of the celebrated “liberation” and the actual fate of Hungary was well-illustrated by the very village of Nemesmedves which was celebrated as the finishing line of the Soviet liberation. The village had been populated by ethnic Germans for a long time. In the aftermath of the Second World War, this population was subjected to large-scale ethnic cleansing by deporting them to Germany throughout Soviet-ruled Eastern Europe. The *Svábs* of Nemesmedves were subjected to the same fate.¹⁷ The village that held the “liberation monument” was, in fact, just another space of dislocation and the application of collective responsibility that did not “wipe away tears” but instead left new scars on top of many others.

In the end, not just the substance of the liberation but the very fact was a lie. While the Soviets drove through Nemesmedves into Austria, at another Hungarian village, Pinkamindszent (Vas county) the Germans were digging trenches. When the Soviets arrived, machine-gun and mortar fire held them back for almost a week. It is a scholarly consensus that Pinkamindszent was held until April 12th.¹⁸

But then, why did the Soviets report the liberation of Hungary on April 4th in the first place? The answer is Stalinist bureaucracy. The plan of the Vienna Strategic Offensive Operation called for the territory of Hungary to be cleared by April 4th. Following the plan and keeping up timetables by any means was an important part of Soviet planning. The lie was not that big: the task was completed by and large, and the advance parties of the 2nd Ukrainian Front were already in the vicinity of Vienna by April 4th. Still, it was not actually true. Nemesmedves was not the last place to be liberated.

Nor is Battonya deemed the first village where the Soviets stepped on Hungarian soil, although it comes from the fact of a different perspective. The Socialists kept the story of redemption strictly among the Trianon borders. In 1944, when the Soviets arrived, Northern Transylvania was still in Hungarian hands following the Treaty of Vienna on 1940 August 30. Modern-day historiography thus defines the start of the Soviet operations in Hungary as the first day when the Soviets reached territory under Hungarian sovereignty. This happened on 1944 August 26, at the village of Sósmező, Székelyföld, in Romania. This transformation of chronology

¹⁷ See for a general discussion of the Sváb deportation: Bank Barbara - Őze Sándor: *A „német ügy” 1945-1953. A Volksbundtól Tiszalökiig*. Digital Edition, Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár. The Nemesmedves deportation was not even hid from public view, see a discussion of the „new settlers” of the Nemesmedves in contemporary media: „Új honfoglalók – vasi telepések hősi küzdelme Nemesmedvesen” *Szabad Nép* 1947.04.20, 7.

¹⁸ Péter Szabó – Norbert Számvéber: *A keleti hadszíntér és Magyarország 1943 – 1945* Püldo, Budapest, 2009, 197. [Digital Edition at Arcanum](#)

illustrates quite well the forces shaping the view and understanding of the history of Central Europe.

V. Past as Anxiety of the Future

Through the many facets of our subject, the “Day of Liberation” is a kaleidoscope of the view and understanding of Hungarian history that shaped and still shapes Hungary. Bureaucratic record-keeping, Marxist doctrine, and the offer of a new society with a new history - this all came together in the creation of April 4th as a Hungarian holiday, all in the backdrop of Communist oppression and destruction. It is not that the Hungarians don’t want to celebrate the defeat of Hitler’s empire in the Second World War together with other parts of Western civilization; we obviously do across the political spectrum. But our struggle did not end with “Liberation Day.” Back then we just changed one murderous ideology to another, and the experience of this is ingrained into the memory of this holiday.

Our uneasy relationship with this day distorts political culture on all sides, which needs to be understood so that Hungarian political debate can be comprehended. The criticism of the West meets heavy denouncements from the centre-left (although not the classic, radical one) because criticism of Western Europe and its political direction evokes the Communist view of history, where the West was the bogeyman imperialist. From the Right, today the most sensitive point that remains is Hungary’s correct relationship to its pre-1945 regimes, which the Communists denounced again and again in their triumphal celebrations. Therefore, the conservative Right needed to find the correct balance between fighting the Communist worldview without unnecessarily rehabilitating the Horthy regime. The search of many Hungarians to revise this history and paint it more positively, however, missed this balancing. It met – at many times, justified - accusations of anti-Semitism in Hungary, given that the Horthy regime, however layered its relationship to Hungarian Jews was, was still complicit in the unfathomable crimes of the Holocaust.

Our relationship with the East and our 20th-century history is thus burdened by our relationship with the historical mythology that was wrapped around April 4th. A deep distrust of imperial centres is core; it is not only about our relationship with the East; much of the debate is really about whether the West is the more dangerous “new Moscow”¹⁹ or the main enemy is still in

¹⁹ Telex, “Deustch Tamás szerint Brüsszel lett az új Moszkva” <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/04/19/deutsch-tamas-szerint-brusszel-lett-az-uj-moszkva>

Russia. This is, in a sense, similar to the debates of other post-colonial countries. Foreign domination is despised, and development is wanted for all, but the debate is raging about who is the most dangerous foreign power, and how can we balance development and sovereignty.

Another important issue is our relationship to modernity. Our relationship to our pre-1945 history is not just about whether veterans of the period (now barely among us) may want to feel positive nostalgia. The question is whether our modern history was a failure. If yes, does it call for forgetting the past and adopting external societal models, or is there something positive to salvage from the history and civilization that existed before the spring of 1945? If we Westernize too much - which is a relentless process of the last 35 years - is it a redemption from the dullness of the Communist era, or rather, it is the fulfilment of the catastrophe of forgetting our national culture, like the Soviets wanted us to? If there was a dead end in Hungarian history before 1945, where did we lose our way? If there is a positive tradition to look for in Hungarian history, what is it, really? These are questions that are strongly tied to the memory of April 4th. Conservative, liberal, left-wing answers are given, respectively, due to their worldviews. But the local variety of these ideologies is strongly defined by the answers posed by the Hungarian past. Liberation Day is but a cross-section of these problems.

It is indeed hard to predict the past, as Adam LeBor said in his recent Danube Institute essay²⁰ on Hungarian historical memory. But it is even harder to predict how and when you will come face to face this unpredictable past when you are heading into the future. Today, Hungarian debates are about the correct geopolitical direction of the country, the meaning and importance of sovereignty, and what cultural trajectory to follow. When Hungarian identity and thought is under scrutiny, the story of April 4th needs to be remembered. That day is although only one (and far from the greatest) among many traumas in recent Hungarian history but still shapes our history and political environment as we know it here in Hungary today. The story of the “Bells of Nemesmedves” and that towering statue above Budapest are not only about the curious events of the Hungarian past, but the country’s view of its future.

²⁰ Adam LeBor: „[Coming to Terms with a Dark Past: Hungary’s struggle over wartime historical memory](#)”

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