



---

Budapest and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918-1919

Author(s): Istvan Deak

Source: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 46, No. 106 (Jan., 1968), pp. 129-140

Published by: the [Modern Humanities Research Association](#) and [University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4205930>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 00:35

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Slavonic and East European Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Budapest and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918–1919

ISTVAN DEAK

BETWEEN October 1918 and August 1919 there were three major political upheavals in Hungary. The first was a bourgeois-democratic revolution with strong proletarian support; it abolished the monarchy, proclaimed the republic and brought into office the democratic coalition government of Count Michael Károlyi. The second upheaval had a distinctly proletarian character; it repudiated bourgeois democracy and gave power to a coalition government of communists and social democrats who proclaimed the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The third event, which we are going to call here a 'popular counter-revolution', consisted of a nation-wide, anti-communist resistance movement of mainly peasant composition. It destroyed the Hungarian Soviet Republic and, although it had little to do with the aristocratic counter-revolution organising its forces outside of the country, it greatly facilitated the return of Hungary's old rulers. Each upheaval saw the participation of very large masses and, since the preceding régime was incapable of resistance, each was brought to a successful conclusion almost without bloodshed. The Hungarian uprisings of 1918–1919 did indeed rest on a wide consensus, although the true extent of this consensus is difficult to establish. First of all, there are not enough documents on this period, a great many personal notes having been destroyed by their authors; secondly, there are very few good histories. The Károlyi period, for instance, still awaits its scholarly monographer and for this era we must content ourselves with some memoirs and the biased general studies on 1918–19 of which Oscar Jaszi's history is still the most attractive example.<sup>1</sup> As for the history of the Soviet Republic,

<sup>1</sup> See Oscar Jaszi, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary*, introduced by R. W. Seton-Watson, London, 1924. The only reliable and analytical study of the revolutionary period published in Horthy-Hungary was written by a 'liberal' counter-revolutionary, Gusztáv Gratz, *A forradalmak kora. Magyarország története, 1918–1920*, Budapest, 1935. There is no worthwhile marxist study known to this writer on the general history of the revolutionary period. Some of the more revealing memoirs on the entire revolutionary period are Michael Károlyi, *Memoirs: Faith Without Illusion*, trans. by Catherine Károlyi, introd. by A. J. P. Taylor, New York, 1957; Vilmos Böhm, *Két forradalom tüzeiben*, 2nd ed., Budapest, 1946. Böhm was a social democrat who played a leading part in both the Károlyi régime and the Soviet Republic; Jakab Weltner, *Forradalom, bolsevizmus, emigráció*, Budapest, 1929,—another important Social Democrat in both régimes who later made his peace with the Horthy government—; Béla Szántó (a leading communist People's commissar), *Klassenkämpfe und die Diktatur des Proletariats in Ungarn*, Vienna, 1920; and Cecile Tormay, *An Ouilaw's Diary*, London, 1923, 2 vols.,—an entertaining account by a frankly reactionary and anti-Semitic woman.

the relevant publications of the Horthy era are invariably prejudiced,<sup>2</sup> while the publications of the post-1948 Rákosi period are full of distortions. Thus an official 'History of the Hungarian Soviet Republic' published in 1949 achieved among its remarkable feats the complete omission of Béla Kun's name.<sup>3</sup> Only since the post-humous rehabilitation of Béla Kun, a victim of Stalin's purges, have Hungarian historians begun valuable work on the history of the revolutions.<sup>4</sup> But even these historians refuse to study the sociology of this period, and while they take the working-class character of the two revolutions for granted, they ignore the popular counter-revolution. As for the western side of the picture, we must be satisfied with a minimum number of modern histories. There are a few valuable studies on the foreign policy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic,<sup>5</sup> and there is an unpublished dissertation by Frank Eckelt.<sup>6</sup> This dissertation, despite some serious factual errors, is the best available study in any language on the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

The key to an understanding of the events of 1918-19 is the fact that the two revolutions were centered in Budapest,<sup>7</sup> while the popular counter-revolution drew its main strength from the countryside and,

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Baron Albert Kaas and Fedor de Lazarovics, *Bolshevism in Hungary: The Béla Kun Period*, London, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Magyar Munkásmozgalmi Intézet, *A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság, 1919*, Budapest, 1949.

<sup>4</sup> Mention should be made here of the numerous documentary collections published recently in Hungary, e.g. the Hungarian labour movement documents: Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Vezetősége Párttörténeti Intézete, *A magyar munkásmozgalom történetének válogatott dokumentumai, V., A magyar munkásmozgalom a Nagy Októberi Szocialista Forradalom győzelmét követő forradalmi fellendülés időszakában... 1917 november 7-1919 március 21*, Budapest, 1956 (hereafter this will be referred to as *Selected Documents, V*), and the less 'selective' collection of documents on the Republic of Councils: A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának Párttörténeti Intézete, *A magyar munkásmozgalom történetének válogatott dokumentumai, VI., A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság, 1919 március 21-1919 augusztus 1*, Budapest, 1959-1960, (hereafter referred to as *Selected Documents, VI*.)

<sup>5</sup> Alfred D. Low, *The Soviet Republic and the Paris Peace Conference*, Philadelphia, 1963, and 'The First Austrian Republic and Soviet Hungary' (*Journal of Central European Affairs*, XX, 2 July, 1960, pp. 174-203). Béla Kun's attempt to set up a friendly Slovak Soviet government is discussed in Peter A. Toma, 'The Slovak Soviet Republic of 1919' (*The American Slavic and East European Review*, XVII, 2, April, 1958, pp. 203-15).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Eckelt, 'The Rise and Fall of the Béla Kun Regime in 1919' (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, New York University, 1965). Another study of considerable interest is F. T. Zsuppán, 'The Early Activities of the Hungarian Communist Party, 1918-1919' (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, XLIII, 101, June 1965, pp. 314-334). A recent publication on the origins and role of the Communist Party of Hungary in the revolutions of 1918-19 is R. L. Tökés, *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic*, New York, 1967; this reliable and serious work is based, through no fault of the author, solely on printed documents. An excellent account of the state of research on Soviet Hungary is J. M. Bak, 'Die Diskussion um die Räterepublik in Ungarn 1919' (*Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, XIV, 4, Munich, 1966, pp. 551-78).

<sup>7</sup> This is not to argue that the two revolutions drew no support from the countryside. There were, in fact, revolutionary organisations in every region of Hungary, even in traditionally conservative and strongly Catholic western Hungary. Unfortunately, there are very few regional studies and we cannot even guess the extent of rural support for the Károlyi and Kun régimes. For a valuable attempt in the direction of such an analysis, see Zsuzsa L. Nagy, *Forradalom és ellenforradalom a Dunántúlon, 1919*, Budapest, 1961.

to a great extent, represented the reaction of the rural population to urban developments. Yet so great was the power and influence of the capital that the rural counter-revolution, when it finally came, could succeed only because of the neutrality of the urban masses. The role of Budapest was therefore decisive in 1918-19, a natural state of affairs if we consider that for the last 150 years the capital city has taken the lead in all of Hungary's political developments. In 1848, again in 1918-19, and finally in 1956 it dragged the countryside along with it in the uprisings.

When on 16 November 1919 Admiral Horthy entered the Hungarian capital on his unforgettable white horse, he promised, in a public address, exemplary punishment to Budapest, that 'sinful' city. For the next twenty-five years, the propagandists of the counter-revolution insisted on identifying the revolutions with Budapest, with alien influence in this city and, generally, with urban culture. They contrasted an image of urban degeneration with that of an idyllic, racially pure, rural Hungary. Gyula Szekfű, the most articulate of the counter-revolutionary historians, argued that there was a direct line of development from 19th-century liberalism to socialism and finally to bolshevism. All these ideologies were of foreign origin, alien to Hungarian mentality, as were the urban businessmen, intellectuals and workers who cultivated these ideas. In fact, Szekfű argues, every development in Hungary since the French Revolution, including party politics, reflected the presence of foreigners in the city population.<sup>8</sup>

There is some truth in this argument. Budapest and many other Hungarian cities were originally inhabited by aliens. In the medieval twin cities of Buda and Pest the Magyars formed a minority among the Germans, Slavs, Jews and Italians, a proportion which remained unchanged until the early 19th century. Then the Hungarian political and cultural revival brought many educated Magyar noblemen into the capital, and the beginnings of industrialisation brought in peasants. In the second half of the 19th century Budapest became the centre of Magyar nationalism, and under both government and popular pressure, Germans and Jews feverishly embraced Magyar culture. The inhabitants of Budapest might have been foreigners by descent but by the end of the 19th century they were patriots. Budapest was responsible for the second, and brilliant, Hungarian cultural revival at the turn of the century, and Hungarian imperialism was assiduously cultivated by the Budapest bourgeois newspapers. Yet it is true that this generation further widened the cultural and economic gap between this city and rural Hungary. Before the war about half of Hungary's industrial goods were

<sup>8</sup> Gyula Szekfű, *Három nemzedék*, Budapest, 1920; 2nd expanded ed., Budapest, 1934.

manufactured in Budapest and ninety per cent of all books were published in this city. Liberalism, anti-clericalism, freemasonry and finally socialism were products of the city and only there were they tolerated. The pre-1914 government of Hungary which ruthlessly insisted on preserving the conservative-patriarchal character of rural Hungary, showed curious indifference toward urban intellectual developments. Moreover, Hungary's ruling landowners, although closely associated with industrial and business capital, remained slightly suspicious of the capitalists and were not invariably hostile to people who combatted capitalism. In his *Memoirs* Michael Károlyi attributed his discovery of Marx to his arch-conservative land-owning uncle who insisted that Károlyi read the works of this great critic of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the development of capitalist industry—and of the anti-capitalist parties—fell to the inhabitants of the Hungarian cities. There were, among these capitalists, and anti-capitalists, a great many Germans and, furthermore, many Jews. While the latter constituted only 4½% of Hungary's total population, they formed a substantial part of the urban element. About half of the Hungarian Jews lived in cities, over 200,000 of them in Budapest where they formed one-fourth of the population.<sup>10</sup> This is all the more remarkable as in so-called 'Jew-ridden' Berlin only 5% and in Vienna only 10% of the population was Jewish. Jewish participation in business, industry and cultural life was phenomenal. Almost all the Hungarian mines and heavy industrial enterprises were owned by Jews, and so were banking, the wholesale trade and much of the retail trade. Jews owned nearly all the Budapest newspapers and comprised 70% of the Budapest journalists. In addition, Jews constituted approximately half of the Budapest lawyers, doctors and university students.<sup>11</sup> These facts proved to be of vital importance for the 1918–19 revolutions.

There is no need to discuss in detail here the social and political contradictions of pre-1914 Hungary: rapid industrial and agricultural development; slowly rising real wages for the workers and a declining living standard for the agricultural labourers; cultural and political freedom in the cities, illiteracy and backwardness in the countryside and in the areas inhabited by the national minorities; a parliamentary system which made a mockery of the elections and a political life which preferred constitutional hair-splitting to serious issues. All these must have played a significant part in preparing

<sup>9</sup> M. Károlyi, *op. cit.*, pp. 26ff.

<sup>10</sup> C. A. Macartney, *A History of Hungary, 1929–1945*, New York, 1956, p. 18. For further demographic data on Hungarian Jewry, see the anti-semitic but statistically reliable Stefan Barta, *Die Judenfrage in Ungarn*, Budapest, n.d. Both Macartney and Barta draw their figures mainly from the census figures for 1910, published in *A Magyar Szentkorona Országainak 1910-évi népszámlálása*, Budapest, 1920.

<sup>11</sup> C. A. Macartney, *op. cit.*, p. 19, and Barta, *op. cit.*, pp. 62 ff. and 107 ff.

the revolution of 1918, but the fact remains that before the war the government of Hungary was relatively stable.<sup>12</sup>

But if before 1914 a revolution was at least unlikely, the war made it inevitable. National survival dictated that an end be put to a régime that was unable to keep the country from virtually bleeding to death. Between 1914 and 1918 almost eight million soldiers were called to the colours in Austria-Hungary and the number of killed, wounded, sick and prisoners has been estimated as high as ninety per cent of the armed forces.<sup>13</sup> By 1918 the Austro-Hungarian army was largely made up of raw recruits, soldiers who had recovered from their wounds, and former prisoners of war released from bolshevik Russia. Added to the loss of manpower, and mostly caused by it, came the steady decline in industrial and food production. By 1918 Hungarian industrial and agrarian output amounted to roughly half of pre-war production.<sup>14</sup> The economy was in ruins. After 1917 not even the army could be tolerably supplied; the sufferings of the workers from the housing shortage, the lack of food and clothing, and declining real wages became unbearable.<sup>15</sup> The spontaneous mass strikes in January and June 1918 expressed the despair of the workers who saw themselves condemned to slow starvation. In October 1918 the dual monarchy collapsed militarily and politically. The Hungarian National Council, formed under Károlyi after all the other national councils had been constituted on the territory of the monarchy, was coerced by mass demonstrations into demanding peace and independence. There is conclusive evidence that not Károlyi's National Council but the mass of Budapest demonstrators brought about a break with the past. Anxious to

<sup>12</sup> See C. A. Macartney, *op. cit.*, pp. 11 ff. It should be noted here that neither the periodic agrarian unrest, nor the two great political strikes organised by the Social Democratic party on 10 October 1907 and on 23 May 1912 had any effect on the stability of the régime in Hungary apart from increasing the anxiety and aggressiveness of government circles. In fact, these political mass demonstrations ended in defeat and the demonstration scheduled for March 1913 was consequently abandoned by the Social Democratic party. On the decline of working-class and bourgeois-democratic militancy before the war, see Zoltán Horváth, *Magyar századforduló. A második reformnemzedék története, 1896-1914*, Budapest, 1961, pp. 346 ff.

<sup>13</sup> As reported by the United States War Department in February 1924. Cited by Vincent J. Esposito, *A Concise History of World War I*, New York, 1964, p. 372. According to this source, Austria-Hungary mobilised 7,800,000 men during the war. Of these 1,200,000 were killed or died; 3,620,000 were wounded, and 2,200,000 were taken prisoner or were missing. Total casualties amounted to 7,020,000 men. Iván T. Berend and György Ránki show in their *Magyarország gazdasága az első világháború után, 1919-1929*, Budapest, 1966, p. 17, that Hungary alone mobilised 3.5 million men during the war, almost 75% of all males fit for service. The proportion of Hungarian casualties slightly exceeded those of the Austrian half of the dual monarchy. The total cost of the war for Austria-Hungary has been estimated at 122.2 billion gold crowns, about five times the annual national income and almost four-fifths of Austria-Hungary's national wealth. See Leo Grebler and Wilhelm Winkler, *The Cost of the World War to Germany and Austria-Hungary*, New Haven, 1940, pp. 180 ff.

<sup>14</sup> Berend and Ránki, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 ff.

<sup>15</sup> By December 1916, industrial real wages sank to 56 per cent of the pre-war level; see *ibid.*, p. 20.



preserve national unity and territorial integrity, the National Council insisted on a legal transfer of power. In a famous incident, Károlyi accepted by telephone from the king his appointment as prime minister of Hungary. Not he, but the demonstrators proclaimed Hungary a democratic republic.<sup>16</sup> Although the revolutionary sentiment of the demonstrators was spontaneous, they were not without leaders. Yet most of the leaders did not come from the ranks of the Károlyi party nor from the central committee of the Social Democratic party. They were lesser known figures: officers at the head of the hastily formed Soldiers' Council, a group of revolutionary shop stewards, and radical socialist intellectuals from within and without the Social Democratic party. No more than a hundred in number, they provided the demonstrators with their slogans and injected socialist demands into the popular clamour for immediate peace and national independence. The revolution of 31 October was immediately triumphant. On that decisive day the resolute military commander of Budapest, General Lukachich, could not find a single soldier, gendarme or policeman willing to shoot at the demonstrators who occupied one strategic building after another. Yet the revolutionaries were so disorganised that—as modern marxist historians admit—a single regiment of loyal soldiers would have sufficed to suppress the revolution.<sup>17</sup>

The Károlyi government, formed on 31 October, expressed the desire of the Budapest masses for universal suffrage, social reform, peace and independence. But the government was hardly representative in the true sense of the word, based as it was on some of Hungary's weakest political parties. The Károlyi party and the Radical party, which provided the first revolutionary cabinet with most of its members, had practically no organisation and very few old-time followers. Only the social democrats, who sent two ministers into the cabinet, could boast of an organisational structure in the form of the trade unions. But, according to a leading social democrat, even this party could expect reliable and lasting support only from approximately 50,000 class-conscious workers.<sup>18</sup> Early in November, however, and again during the February-March revolution, the Social Democratic party enjoyed the sympathy of perhaps a million people who hastened to join the party and the trade unions. It was on the basis of this seemingly strong, in reality very fickle, support that the social democrats claimed and obtained the right to participate in every revolutionary and in the first counter-revolutionary government.

<sup>16</sup> There is a delightful and accurate narrative account of the October Revolution in Hungary by Tibor Hajdu, *Az őszirozsás forradalom*, Budapest, 1963.

<sup>17</sup> Hajdu, *op. cit.*, p. 160. See also Jaszi, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Böhm, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

The Károlyi régime was a resounding failure. Despite some achievements, as for instance the orderly demobilisation of the army, it accomplished very little. It made plans for many reforms, but in the end it did not nationalise any part of industry or business; because of the doctrinaire opposition of the social democrats it did not distribute land among the peasants; it did not hold elections; it did not maintain order; last but not least, it was incapable of resisting the growing territorial demands of Hungary's neighbours. The reasons for this failure are so manifold as to defy enumeration. A dictatorship—for elections were never held—that was afraid to be dictatorial, a coalition cabinet in which each party constantly threatened withdrawal, an internally divided and over-anxious social democracy that chose to adopt a dogmatic and therefore negative attitude on every issue of social reform—this democratic régime had no saving grace except the high intellectual capacity of some of its members.

From the very beginning it threatened to succumb to the onslaught of impatient leagues, associations and trade unions, all of which—from the Revolutionary Council of the Cripples to the Trade Union of the Gendarmes—were ready to enforce with weapons the fulfilment of their often preposterous demands for more money and privileges.<sup>19</sup> It was the great triumph of the nascent Communist party that it was able to voice these assorted grievances and to ride into power at the head of the exasperated factions. By February 1919 the country was in anarchy. On 20 March 1919, when the Entente powers demanded in an ultimatum that Hungary evacuate territories originally assigned to her by the armistice agreements, the government used the opportunity to resign. The demonstrating masses agitated for a government able to introduce social reforms, to get the economy going again and to resist the Entente's territorial demands. All of this the communists promised to accomplish. Bowing before the wish of the demonstrators, the social democratic leaders effected a union with the communists. On 21 March the Hungarian Republic of Soviets and the United Socialist party of Hungary were proclaimed amidst general jubilation.<sup>20</sup> With the exception of a few moderate social democrats there were no dissenters; in a wave of abject submission thousands of bourgeois and aristocrats applied for admission to the party of the proletariat. In fact, the union of the working-class parties was a marriage of reason, for only the social democrats could provide the régime with an organisational structure and with cadres of indoctrinated workers, and only the communists

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117, and *passim*. See also *Selected Documents*, V, pp. 581 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Tibor Hajdu (*Március huszonegyediké*, Budapest, 1959) treats the March 1919 events adequately.



could guarantee the support of the unemployed or unorganised workers, the discharged soldiers, and the impoverished employees. Moreover, the communists brought the promise of Russian military intervention against Hungary's neighbours. But even in foreign affairs the Social Democratic party remained indispensable. Its leaders alone had Western contacts, a line of orientation that Béla Kun, for all his talk about world revolution, never desired Hungary to abandon. Indeed, Kun was as interested in negotiating with the Entente powers as he was in securing the support of the Russian army.

Common interest did not mean mutual respect or affection. The history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic is that of continuous hostility between the social democrats and the communists, of a struggle for power, and finally of attempts at mutual betrayal. In this conflict the social democrats generally gained the upper hand. Yet in the interests of national defence, and because of their customary fear of unconditional power, they abstained to the last from ending the hated alliance.

The spectacular military exploits of the Hungarian Soviet Republic against Rumania and Czechoslovakia,<sup>21</sup> its attractive welfare and cultural legislation,<sup>22</sup> and its hasty socialist experiments consisting of total nationalisation right down to personal jewellery, small family savings and the bathrooms of the bourgeoisie are well known to historians. It is perhaps less well known how rapidly this régime lost the confidence of the masses. The early indifference of the rural population turned into intense hostility when it became clear that socialist land reform meant simply the turning over of the large estates to state-appointed managers who were often the former owners.<sup>23</sup> Yet not even the workers were always reliable. With the exception of a few weeks in May 1919, when in an outburst of enthusiasm workers' battalions rushed to the front to defeat the Czechoslovak invaders, the workers showed their indifference to the Hungarian Soviet government's programme by rapidly declining productivity,<sup>24</sup> and they flooded the Workers' Councils

<sup>21</sup> See the Hungarian Red Army documents: A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának Párttörténeti Intézete, *A Magyar Vörös Hadsereg, 1919, Válogatott dokumentumok*, Budapest, 1959; and the selection of Stromfeld's writings: Tibor Hetés (ed.), *Stromfeld Aurél válogatott írásai*, Budapest, 1959. Stromfeld was a brilliant officer in the Austro-Hungarian army who enthusiastically joined the Hungarian Soviet Republic. As Chief of Staff of the Hungarian Red Army he led his troops to the reconquest of the northeastern part of the old Kingdom of Hungary.

<sup>22</sup> On these subjects, see the following documentary collections: Katalin Petrák and György Milei (eds.), *A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság szociálpolitikája*, Budapest, 1959, and *A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság művelődéspolitikája*, Budapest, 1959.

<sup>23</sup> Vera Szemere (*Az agrárkérdés 1918–1919-ben*, Budapest, 1963) deals with the problem unsatisfactorily.

<sup>24</sup> Böhm (*op. cit.*, p. 278) reports that by 29 June 1919, coal output had fallen to a little over half of the already inadequate October 1918 level (Böhm's evidence derived from the secret minutes of the National Congress of Councils). See also Jaszi, *op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff. During the debates of the National Congress of Councils, several speakers, among

with complaints about the ruthlessness of the bolshevik commissars. As for the Hungarian Red Army, it was a rabble in the first six weeks of the Soviet Republic, and it became a rabble again by June 1919.<sup>25</sup> Only certain industries with well-established trade-union organisations and certain segments of the middle class, for example the teachers' and artists' associations, remained loyal to the government. The Republic of Soviets survived for 133 days only because of the dedication of these groups, because of chaos in the counter-revolutionary camp of Admiral Horthy and the hesitation of the Entente powers. By July 1919, without any military reversal, and without any meaningful intervention on the part of the aristocratic counter-revolutionaries gathered in foreign-occupied areas, the Hungarian Soviet régime had lost almost all its power. The peasants refused to provision the cities<sup>26</sup> and in many places engaged in open rebellion; the railwaymen paralysed communications and the Hungarian Red Army threatened to march on the capital. In Budapest some social democrats planned the overthrow of the Soviet Republic, others negotiated with the Entente in Vienna.<sup>27</sup> When the Rumanian troops crossed the Tisza river at the end of July and began to march on Budapest, they met with no resistance whatever.

After 1919 the communist and social democratic exiles engaged in mutual recrimination. Both sides agreed that the fusion of the two parties was a fatal mistake, as was the Hungarian Soviet Republic's dogmatic agrarian policy.<sup>28</sup> Yet it is difficult to see how the régime

---

them people's commissar Jenő Varga, clearly indicated that the disastrous decline in workers' productivity was not due to starvation but rather to chaotic conditions in the industry and to the discontent of the workers: *Selected Documents*, VI/2, pp. 94 ff.

<sup>25</sup> See the speech of people's commissar Béla Szántó at the National Congress of Councils on 21 June 1919: *Selected Documents*, VI/2, pp. 205 ff. It is worth noting that in June and July army units of peasant composition were considered more reliable than the workers' battalions. According to Böhm (*op. cit.*, p. 319) this was due to the fact that many peasant-soldiers were native to the areas occupied by Hungary's neighbours and that they were fighting for the return of their homeland. Böhm was at first Commissar for War, then Commander-in-Chief of the Hungarian Red Army. On the unreliability of the workers' battalions in June and July, see: *A Magyar Vörös Hadsereg, 1919*, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Jaszi (*op. cit.*, p. 72) describes Budapest as a *ville tentaculaire* (Verhaeren). Swollen by refugees and discharged soldiers to nearly twice its pre-war population, the city 'devoured and exhausted the produce of the countryside, with hardly any return but to shake the land with political convulsions'.

<sup>27</sup> Böhm, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Gabor, 'Bericht über den Sturz der Rätemacht in Ungarn' (*Kommunistische Internationale*, I, 7/8, Petrograd 1919, pp. 237–48) and Andreas Rudniansky, 'Die Gewerkschaften und die Gegenrevolution in Ungarn' (*ibid.*, I, 4/5, August–September 1919, pp. 121–6). For a recent historical summary of the post-1919 Hungarian communist and Comintern position on the fusion of the two parties and on the Soviet Republic's agrarian policy, see James W. Hulse, *The Forming of the Communist International*, Stanford, 1964, pp. 37 ff. The post-1919 social democratic position on the same subjects is best elaborated in Böhm, *op. cit.*, p. 210 and *passim*. The communists argued roughly (but not at all unanimously) that the union of the two parties and the influx of the petty bourgeoisie into the party of the proletariat affected the revolutionary élan of the working class; the social democrats maintained that the Republic of Soviets was a national bolshevist

could have come to power without this fusion. And while the socialisation of the large estates was a tremendous tactical mistake, it is not at all certain that a Leninist land-distribution policy could have saved the Soviet Republic. The discontent of the peasants was not motivated alone by the absence of land distribution, but also by the wild anti-religious propaganda of individual communist agitators<sup>29</sup> and by the government's unfortunate attempt to pay the peasants for their food with a new currency that nobody wanted. Yet even the hostility of the peasants would not necessarily have been fatal had the workers not lost faith in their leaders. The collapse of the régime was an accomplished fact once the government lost its urban mass base, and Béla Kun was certainly right when in his last Budapest address he accused the workers of having deserted the Soviet Republic.<sup>30</sup>

This desertion was due to terror, to utopian experimentation,<sup>31</sup> to lack of discipline among the workers, but also to the social origin and inept behaviour of the Soviet leaders. The great majority of the people's commissars, especially the communists, were not workers but journalists, lawyers, teachers, bank clerks and other intellectuals.<sup>32</sup> Only a minority had any experience in dealing with workers. Finally, the great majority of the people's commissars were Jews. Whether the proportion of Jews among the commissars was over 70% as Frank Eckelt claims, or 95% as Oscar Jászi has argued,<sup>33</sup> the fact remains that all the truly important positions were occupied by people of Jewish background. Modern Hungarian marxist historiography simply ignores this situation. On the other hand, the counter-revolutionary historians identified the Jews with the revolution. This was entirely false, for the victims of the 'red terror',

---

aberration. On this problem, see David T. Cattell, 'The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 and the Reorganisation of the Comintern in 1920' (*Journal of Central European Affairs*, XI, 1, January-April 1951, pp. 27-38).

<sup>29</sup> e.g. the speech of people's commissar György Nyisztor at the National Congress of Councils on 21 June 1919: *Selected Documents*, VI/2, pp. 208 ff.

<sup>30</sup> See the stenographic reports of the National Workers' Council on 2 August 1919, cited by Böhm, *op. cit.*, pp. 356 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Nothing illustrates better the self-assured utopianism of the Hungarian Soviet régime than the following excerpt from people's commissar Jenő Hamburger's speech at the National Congress of Councils on June 17 1919: (VI/2, 121); "In connection with the realisation of the land reform, we have succeeded in skipping over . . . one stage of evolution, that of land distribution. . . . We can say with pride and with good right, that we have realised the land-reform from a Communist point of view, with more thoroughness, foresight and purpose than it was realised by our Russian comrades." (Voices from the floor: "How very true!"): *Selected Documents*, VI/2, p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> There was only one genuine proletarian among the communist People's commissars, a lathe operator by the name of Rezső Fiedler. On the other hand, the social democrats boasted a handful of working-class commissars, the best known being Jozsef Haubrich, a former iron worker who in June 1919 sided with a counter-revolutionary uprising. Surprisingly, he was not removed from office and later opposed a social democratic plot to overthrow the Soviet Republic. See Eckelt, *op. cit.*, pp. 184 and 190 ff.

<sup>33</sup> Jászi, *op. cit.*, pp. 122 ff., and Eckelt, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

and the counter-revolutionary groups, also included a disproportionately high number of Jews.<sup>34</sup> But it was also false to argue, as some Jewish and liberal writers did after 1919,<sup>35</sup> that the Jewish commissars were recruited from among the Jewish *Lumpenproletariat* and *Lumpenbourgeoisie*—the non-assimilated, non-successful part of the Jewish population in Hungary. On the contrary, facts show that the Jewish members of Károlyi's National Council were brilliant and wealthy intellectuals and even among the Jewish people's commissars there were a great number of educated men formerly in secure positions. Nor does the customary argument make sense in the Hungarian context, that the Jews, having been barred from civil service, army, teaching and political careers, turned in their frustration to revolutionary socialism. This might have been true in imperial Germany but not in royal Hungary, where the Jews were not second-class citizens and where there were relatively large numbers of Jews in the highest judicial positions, among the great landowners, university professors, reserve officers and civil servants.<sup>36</sup> The reasons for the enormously high Jewish participation in the revolutions must be sought, obviously, in the particularly high Jewish representation in all intellectual areas. But beyond that, there must have been other reasons—humanistic and messianic—which drove so many Jews into the revolution. Certainly an important factor was the traditional western, particularly German, orientation of the Jewish intelligentsia.<sup>37</sup> A Hungarian Jewish intellectual was likely to be familiar with the latest German cultural trends, especially with expressionism. Only these factors explain why so many well-bred young Jewish intellectuals rebelled against their assimilated and intensely patriotic families, and against their bourgeois background. The case of people's commissar George Lukács, the son of a millionaire banker, and that of Béla Kun, whose father was an ardently nationalistic municipal employee, should serve as examples. Be that as it may, the impatient messianism of the Jewish leaders was a disaster for the revolutions, for the leftist cause and for Hungarian Jewry.

<sup>34</sup> Eckelt (*ibid.*, p. 63) shows that 18% of the hostages held by the Red terrorists and 8.2% of the martyrs of the counter-revolution were Jews. On the same subject, see Gábor Radnai, *A zsidók az ellenforradalomban*, Budapest, 1920.

<sup>35</sup> See Gratz, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> Eckelt (*op. cit.*, pp. 57 ff.) writes that in 1910 6.5% of the Hungarian university professors and 5.2% of the civil servants were Jews. Macartney (*op. cit.*, p. 19) states that, in the same year, 16.5% of the owners of landed properties with over 1000 yokes and 53.7% of the persons renting such properties were Jews. Furthermore, Macartney claims that half of the professors in Budapest University were Jewish and that in 1907, seven out of the thirteen members of the Highest Court of Appeal in Hungary were Jews (*ibid.*, pp. 19 ff.) It was well known at that time that several of the Catholic bishops were also of Jewish descent. It is no less remarkable that the war cabinets of royal Hungary included two Jewish members—General Baron Samuel Hazai, Minister of Defence 1910-1917, and Vilmos Vázsonyi, Minister of Justice 1915-17 and 1918.

<sup>37</sup> Jaszi, *op. cit.*, pp. 119 ff. talks forcefully about the religious mysticism, German idealism and messianism of the Jewish people's commissars.

The minutes of the National Congress of Councils in June 1919 tell of the growing anti-Semitism of the workers.<sup>38</sup> The question must remain open whether a Christian revolutionary leadership—had there been any such thing in Hungary—would have fared any better; the fact remains that the Jewish intellectualism of the Hungarian Soviet leaders provided an ideal target for the disappointed and exhausted workers.

On 1 August 1919 a Social Democratic and Trade Union government was formed under Gyula Peidl. It was thrown out of office a few days later by a handful of officers and policemen.<sup>39</sup> Not a single worker lifted a finger in defence of Hungary's last leftist government. For a few months afterwards Budapest was under Rumanian occupation. When the Rumanians finally withdrew, the way was open for Admiral Horthy to march into Budapest and proclaim himself Hungary's liberator. In fact, Horthy's role in the overthrow of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was negligible. Neither he nor the Rumanians, but the Hungarian peasants had destroyed the Soviet Republic. Moreover, there was very little community of interest between the peasants who wanted land and Horthy who was unwilling to introduce land reform. Under the Horthy régime Hungary became an anti-social, authoritarian and ridiculously backward country.

In view of the 'White terror' that descended on Hungary in 1919, it is possible to argue that the democratic and socialist revolutions were untimely. Yet it is hard to see why the October Revolution should have been avoided, for national survival required the overthrow of a conservative government that would neither make peace nor introduce reforms. Unfortunately for Hungary, the Károlyi régime did not know how to exploit the tremendous consensus which had swept it into power. The Hungarian Soviet Republic, although a logical outcome of the failure of the Károlyi régime, was still a tragedy for the nation, for its effect was to stifle the original wide spread consensus for progress and equality. Not until the end of the Second World War did the Hungarian masses regain interest in democracy and socialism.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148 ff. The communist M. Gabor writes (*Kommunistische Internationale*, November–December, 1919, p. 240) that during the National Congress of Soviets the majority of the speeches 'were so counter-revolutionary and anti-semitic, that it was impossible to publish the reports of the sessions.'

<sup>39</sup> Gratz, *op. cit.*, pp. 230 f.