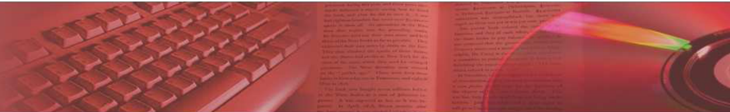
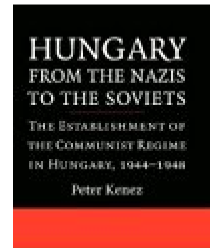


Peter Kenez. *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. ix + 312 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85766-6.



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Suspending the Axe

As the scholarly production around the Cold War history of East-Central Europe grows, it is worth taking stock of where research has come from and where it is going in light of the most recent additions to the canon relating to the communist takeover. Peter Kenez's book on Hungary during the immediate postwar period touches on a number of themes with lengthening academic genealogies: whether Stalin and the Soviets had a plan for the takeover; whether local communists and/or non-communists had a say in the matter; and whether these states would have become successful democracies had it not been for the Red Army presence. Similar questions have long haunted the historiography of Hungary and other East-Central European states, and the takeover was originally often studied in its regional context rather than within individual national ones.[1] By far the national focus has come to prevail in recent years, especially as consensus has hardened around the diversity of experiences among states in the region.[2]

Because Kenez's focus is on Hungary from 1944 to 1948, his book will likely attract comparisons with the work of Charles Gati, most notably his book *Hungary in the Soviet Bloc*, and László Borhi's more recent *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945-1956.*[3] Kenez is clearly responding to both, especially to Borhi's work. Indeed, Kenez parts ways early and often with Borhi, primarily concerning Borhi's claim that the Soviets had a plan from the beginning to take over Hungary. Soviet policy was fluid, he argues in the introduction, but in fact the book is not really about the Soviets or their policy. Like both Gati and Borhi before him, Kenez brings remarkably few Soviet sources to bear on his analysis, focusing instead on Hungarian sources from the Hungarian State Archives, Communist Party archives, and secondary sources. This is likely at least in part an access issue, but it also suggests that there are still holes in the historiography of this period that warrant filling.

In any case, the contrast/comparison of Kenez's with Borhi's work can only be stretched so far, because with this book Kenez has entered a much broader and more established set of historiographical conversations. In arguing that the period of 1944-1948 was one "very different both from what preceded and from what would follow," (p. 4) he challenges two interpretations of how periodization should operate over the war-postwar years. One such interpretation is Borhi's claim–hardly new in itself–that the Soviets planned to take over Hungary from the beginning and, therefore, the period from 1945 to 1948 should not be considered distinct from what came after. The other interpretation is to be found in the work of Jan Gross, who has argued that the war and the immediate postwar years in Poland, for example, should be considered one and the same period characterized by the revolutionary social upheaval initiated by the events of the war.[4]

Kenez acknowledges that what happened in Hungary after World War II represented a serious shakedown of the social order, which had long maintained the abyss between the "haves" and the "have nots." However, he

stresses that the transformation took place only starting in 1945. This is when, in the words of Hungarian political theorist István Bibó, "for the first time sihnce 1514 the rigid social system started to move, and move in the direction of greater freedom" (p. 107). Kenez argues that 1944 to 1948 should be viewed as a period in itself. Here Kenez implicitly accepts the periodization offered by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his 1960 work, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*.[5]

Kenez's analysis works both chronologically and thematically, beginning with a chapter on "Autumn 1944" in which he outlines the grim prognosis for Hungary's future as a democratic nation, but stops short of portraying it as a doomed entity. He also introduces the cast of communist characters whose return to Hungary from Moscow signaled the beginning of a new era. All of them, he notes, with the exception of the later reluctant hero of the 1956 revolution, Imre Nagy, were Jewish (p. 23). For subsequent developments, their Jewishness proved less a factor than their Moscow training, which Kenez argues "deformed them as human beings" and made them "subservient to a foreign power to the extent of being unable even to imagine that the interests of Hungary and that of international Communism might not coincide" (pp. 291-292). He goes on to suggest that their Jewishness *did* cause them to be paranoid about being *perceived* as foreign, the result being that they attempted to compensate by co-opting former national socialists (members of the Arrow Cross) into their ranks as a means of demonstrating their nationalist credentials. Kenez notes that party leader Matyas Rakosi "went so far as to imitate a peasant accent and peppered his speeches with what seemed to him to be village expressions" (p. 157).

The picture Kenez paints of the communist leadership (both in Budapest and in Moscow) of the time is thus hardly complimentary. He often cites their gruffness and uncompromising single-mindedness as alienating where it could have forged alliances or smoothed some aspect of the political and/or social reforms. He is especially critical of communists' strivings toward a planned and fully nationalized economy, attributing their stubbornness more to personality traits than to ideological convictions. Although he acknowledges that "the only explanation for their behavior must be their deeply held Marxist faith," one wonders what the substance of that "faith" was; whether, for example, Moscow was and had always been their only source of ideological inspiration (p. 23).

In fact, ideology as a historicizable manifestation is largely absent from Kenez's work. Indeed, it is strikingly absent from much of the historiography on the communist takeover in East-Central Europe in general. Scholars who work on this period in Hungarian history do not seem to take it very seriously.[6] It gives the reader pause to wonder whether the activities and attitudes of Hungarian communists and their Soviet counterparts can truly be reduced to the exigencies of a cynical *Realpolitik*, or even to a static and unanimously accepted form of ideological orthodoxy. Here the work of Robert Levy springs to mind as a possible alternative to the above interpretations. His autobiography of Romanian Stalinist Ana Pauker reveals great variance in her perception of the Soviets, her own relationship to Marxist ideology, as well as her policy decisions over the course of her career.[7]

One could scarcely argue that postwar communist leaders in Hungary were always and only focused on the national interest. Still, Kenez's criticism of them as largely indifferent to specifically Hungarian concerns seems overstated given his excellent descriptions of how Rakosi and others lobbied Moscow so that Hungary could be allowed to maintain some of the territorial compensation it had won as an Axis ally, as well as to protect the Hungarian minority in the neighboring states. Though these efforts were largely in vain, they do show that on certain matters, the communist leadership in Hungary had a will of its own tied to what it perceived to be the Hungarian interest. It seems Rakosi and other communist leaders picked and chose their battles with Moscow. Perhaps their lack of success is more noteworthy than any lack of effort. Similar to the fate of the 1919 Hungarian communist revolution led by Béla Kun, if the communist leaders of the post-1945 period had managed to recover some of Hungary's lost territory, the fate of communism in Hungary would likely have been much different.

Nevertheless, Kenez argues convincingly that there was little native sympathy for communism and/or the Soviets in Hungary in 1945. Hungary, as an ally of Nazi Germany, was an enemy state and the Red Army took a fairly punitive attitude toward the local population during occupation. Rape and looting were common occurrences, and over 600,000 Hungarians became prisoners of war in the USSR, many not returning for years, if at all.[8] Furthermore, the 1919 Hungarian Republic of Soviets left behind a powerful symbolic legacy of failure, and the crackdown on its leaders was so harsh that it discouraged sympathy for leftism and provided a political basis for blocking social changes such as wide-reaching land reform that other states in the region initiated just

after World War I. In short, following the Soviet victory communists in Hungary had an especially uphill battle to fight to secure their legitimacy.

In a wonderful chapter on cinema, Kenez highlights the lack of Hungarian enthusiasm for things Soviet through the lens of the Hungarian film industry. Originally, political parties (including non-communists) were given theaters and shares in film production funds. Increasingly, however, the Soviets pushed Soviet films on Hungarian audiences by slowly eliminating competition from other countries (most notably the United States) and playing Soviet films in theaters. Audiences and many communists in Hungary were decidedly unimpressed by these films. In the words of one Hungarian communist propaganda official, "There is a broad, but indifferent audience, which includes even a majority of the Party members, who find the mentality of the Soviet films alien" (p. 252).

Kenez also discusses the nationalization of religious schools in Hungary as a move that met with unexpectedly tenacious resistance against things Soviet. Hungary had many such schools and a large proportion of its population prior to the war had received their education in one of them. It is refreshing to see that in this book, as in other recent work on Hungary for this period, discussions of the role of religion and religious institutions have started to move beyond the antics and misfortunes of the outrageous critic/Cold War martyr Cardinal Mindszenty (although Kenez does discuss him at some length, as indeed he must).[9]

Yet despite antipathy toward the Soviets and resistance to some communist policies, Kenez does not claim that leftism (particularly in the form of populism) was alien or lacked sympathizers in Hungary. Although varieties of nationalism pervaded large segments of the voting populace, many Hungarians could get excited about the redistribution of land and resources in a country that had long remained the last bastion of crippling social inequality. Kenez portrays the Smallholders Party–the communists' most significant rival in Hungary–as a force that could have carried Hungary to functioning democracy status without returning national politics to their prewar *habitus*. Yet the Smallholders were forced to make multiple and ever more frequent compromises with the communists. Believing that the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary–which according to the peace treaty was to take place in 1947–would result in considerably more freedom of action, opposition parties yielded to communist pressure to shift their policies and constituencies away from populist leftism. Thinking they were biding their time until the Soviet troop withdrawal, the non-communists "were maneuvered into accepting the terms of their opponents," specifically by allowing terms like "fascist" and "reactionary" to be applied to enemies of the communists, and eventually were themselves tarred with those same epithets despite their social reform credentials (p. 136).

Kenez's discussion of the communist leadership's tactics, as well as those of the Soviets, leads him to echo the conclusion reached by Hugh Seton-Watson in 1950 that the "revolution" in East-Central Europe was imposed from "outside and above."[10] On the subject of how implicated Hungarians were in sealing their own fate, Kenez, like most others (with the exception of Abrams) has a light touch. Among the first lines of the book is that "what happened in Hungary was decided elsewhere, primarily in Moscow" (p. 1). Although Borhi also argues that the nations of East-Central Europe "were not the masters of their own fate," Kenez's claim runs counter to Borhi's insistence that the communist takeover in Hungary was in large part the fault of the Allies, who early on turned the keys to Hungary over to the Soviets.[11]

Reading this book, it is easy to forget that the time and place Kenez describes are intimately familiar to him. Kenez, a native of Budapest, was six years old in 1943. Thus, the postwar years were as formative for him as they were for Hungary. This is documented in his wonderful autobiography, *Varieties of Fear: Growing up Jewish under Nazism and Communism*.[12] Among the most fascinating and enlightening parts of *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets*, in my view, are the places where Kenez's personal experience seems to merge with the historical phenomena he is describing. This includes a probing section on postwar anti-Semitism, graphic descriptions of the poverty and destitution in Hungary after the war, as well as the incredible optimism of those years. There is a wonderful image showing bleachers full of Budapest youth attending a protest against "anti-republican conspiracy" (p. 231). In retrospect, these events look farcical and false, but at the time, before Orwellian doublespeak, sloganeering, and other attributes of high Stalinism had made their definitive mark, defending the republic clearly meant something to people in Hungary.

In another section on the period of 1946-1947, Kenez writes, "in spite of the hardships, [m]ost people believed in a better future" (p. 127). These moments serve as reminders of the pitfalls of teleology and strong support for Kenez's claim that this period should be considered dis-

tinct from the post-1948 years. Could it/should it have been clear to everyone at the time that the axe was about to fall? Notes

[1]. This includes Vojtech Mastny's 1979 book *Russia's Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1979), and Hugh Seton-Watson's 1950 *The East European Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1950]).

[2]. The work of Zbigniew Brzezinksi, specifically his 1960 book *Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), proved influential, arguing that the communist camp was neither homogeneous, nor, monolithic, nor unchanging. Since then, there has been a spate of works emphasizing national uniqueness among the states that experienced Red Army occupation and communist takeover after World War II. Among the most recent are Bradley Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); John Connelly's comparative study of university systems in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Poland, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Charles Gati, *Hungary in the Soviet Bloc* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1986); and Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), to name a few.

[3]. Charles Gati, *Hungary*; László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945-1956* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004).

[4]. Jan Gross, "War as Revolution" in *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*, ed. Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997). Here Kenez is also in explicit conversation with Hungarian historian Krisztián Ungváry, who has argued that the communist period in Hungary started in 1945 (see page 4, n. 3).

[5]. The book came out in three editions, the first in 1960, the last in 1967. In the last, Brzezinski offers the following periodization: 1945-1947 is the People's Democracy period, characterized by institutional and ideological diversity; 1947-1953 is Stalinism, with institutional and ideological uniformity; 1953-1959 he calls "from thaw to deluge," characterized again by institutional and ideology diversity; 1957-1959 he refers to as the "communist commonwealth," characterized by institutional diversity and ideological uniformity; and finally, 1960-1964 he calls "communist pluralism," with both institutional and ideological diversity. Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc, Unity and Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967, c. 1960).

[6]. A partial exception can be found in the work of Johanna Granville, who in her book *The First Domino: International Decision-Making during the Hungarian Crisis of 1956* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2004) talks about ideological influences on international relations decision making during 1956. It is noteworthy, however, that her work does not deal with the communist takeover period.

[7]. Robert Levy, *Ana Pauker: The Rise and Fall of a Jewish Communist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[8]. For POW figures, see p. 12. Gabriel Temkin's *My Just War: The Memoir of a Jewish Red Army Soldier in World War II* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1998) documents the activities of the Red Army in Hungary and Romania from the perspective of a Jewish Red Army soldier. Alaine Polcz's memoir *One Woman in the War: Hungary, 1944-1945* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2002) offers a sobering portrait of the practice of rape among Red Army soldiers in Hungary.

[9]. Most recently, historian Paul Hanebrink in his book *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism and Antisemitism, 1890-1944* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006) has made a compelling argument for taking religion more seriously as a factor in Hungarian government policy–vis-a-vis the Jews in particular–prior to the end of World War II and after.

[10]. Seton-Watson, *The East European Revolution.*

[11]. Borhi, *Hungary*, 17, 21. On this point, Kenez also seems to part ways with Gati, whose latest work is also very critical of the West's Cold War attitude toward Hungary. Gati recently suggested that President Bush should apologize for leading the Hungarians on in 1956. "Bush Sees Parallels: 1956 Hungary and 2006 Iraq" `http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?~storyId=5504566` [accessed June 4, 2007, 3:47 p.m.] See also, Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[12]. Peter Kenez, *Varieties of Fear: Growing up Jewish under Nazism and Communism* (Lanham, MD: American University Press, 1995).

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