

Mária Palasik. *Chess Game for Democracy: Hungary between East and West, 1944-1947*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. xvii + 230 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-3849-8; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-3850-4.

Reviewed by Deborah S. Cornelius (Independent Scholar)

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The Struggle for Power in Hungary, 1945-47

In East Central Europe the short postwar period, from 1945 through 1948, has come under increased scrutiny in recent years. Several central questions have emerged. Did the Soviets have an established plan for the countries of East Central Europe? Was there ever a possibility for the formation of multiparty democratic systems? Why was it that the Soviet Union suddenly changed its approach from one designed to placate the Western Allies to one of open confrontation? Historians have begun to portray these years as a time in which Soviet policy was not predetermined, but fluid, and in which Joseph Stalin was eager to maintain the alliance with the Western Allies.

In his study *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (1998), Mark Mazower supports the thesis that the Soviets had no overall strategy for Eastern Europe. In 1945, he argues, Stalin was focused on the question of creating a friendly Germany: other political parties would be tolerated and parliamentary elections held. James Felak, in his recent book, *After Hitler, Before Stalin: Catholics, Communists, and Democrats in Slovakia, 1945-1948* (2009), treats the years from 1945 to 1948 as a particularly critical period in the history of Czechoslovakia, in which the resurrected Czech Republic tried to find its place in an increasingly polarized Europe. Anne Applebaum, in *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956* (2012), describes how the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe were created in the years immediately following the war, and she portrays, in devastating detail, how all institutions of civil society at every level were quickly eviscerated and destroyed.

In Hungarian historiography, the immediate postwar years have been considered part of the takeover by the Communist Party. Mária Palasik's work, *Chess Game for Democracy*, however, portrays Hungary in the years from late 1944 to 1947 as full of hope for the establishment of a true democracy, despite occupation by Red Army

troops and a Soviet-controlled Allied Control Commission (ACC). She counters the myth that communism was introduced immediately after the war and highlights the efforts of those who led the struggle to establish a multiparty democratic system. Her work follows in the wake of two fine histories of the period: László Borhi's *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945-1956* (2004) and Peter Kenez's *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948* (2006). Palasik's work, a political history, is based on ten years of systematic research and her unprecedented access to the State Security Archives.

The strength of her work is the way in which—through her use of these sources and careful research—she has managed to bring to life the personalities and political maneuvering of the two most powerful parties in the government coalition during this three-year period: the Independent Smallholders Party and the Communist Party. Her blow-by-blow account demonstrates exactly how the Communist Party—with occasional help from the Soviet-administered ACC and the Soviet Union—operated to block the Independent Smallholders in their attempts to create and maintain the parliamentary system. The history of the struggle reads like a series of moves in a dramatic chess game, where at the beginning “no one could have predicted the outcome for certain. Had the outcome been clear ... there would have been no need to resort to force in 1947, no need for the Communist Party to insist on Soviet help to take over” (pp. xvi-xvii).

In her brief account of Hungarian history from the end of World War I to the end of World War II, Palasik emphasizes the conservative nature of the regime that came to power after the Peace Treaty of Trianon. The regime favored the aristocracy, landed nobility, and civil servants, while neglecting the welfare of the large peasant population. Thus the radical land reform in early spring of 1945—pushed through by the Soviet adminis-

tration to win peasant support—did bring about a true social revolution. The land reform, initiated even before the fighting had stopped, liquidated the system of landed estates and essentially ended the rule of the Old Regime, fulfilling the long-held desires of the peasantry for land of their own.

Despite abuses by the Communist-controlled political police, the population held great hopes for the upcoming elections to be held in November 1945. The outlines of a multiparty system had begun to evolve, and Western analysts called the proposed law governing the elections the most democratic in the region. Quoting the Hungarian Communist leader Matyás Rákosi, Palasik shows that at this time Soviet intentions were not yet clear: Stalin had instructed the leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party to set aside their revolutionary aims and—for the time being—to give up the socialist transformation of society. “The policies we are pursuing today ... these policies are the adaptations of Marxism to the circumstances, to this period in which we work.’ This is the line taken in the Soviet Union by comrade Stalin” (pp. 36-37).

Palasik describes the euphoria with which the population greeted the sweeping victory won by the Independent Smallholders Party, and the consternation of the Communists, who had convinced themselves, especially after the land reform, that they would achieve a clear victory. In delineating the moves in the elaborate “chess game” after the election, she highlights the interplay between members of the Smallholders Party and the Soviets, who attempted to interfere in the formation of the government, demanding the formation of a coalition government, with equal power to the Communist Party. These demands included, most important, the position of the Ministry of the Interior.

Throughout the book Palasik questions the inactivity of the Western Allies. According to the formula for the formation of the ACC, the occupying power was granted control of the ACC in that country. But she points out that the Western Allies still had a certain amount of influence in the ACC in Hungary. They remained silent in the face of the increasing illegal measures taken by the Communist-controlled law enforcement agencies and the Soviet interference in the affairs of the coalition government. Quoting from a record of a meeting between the American ambassador, Arthur Schoenfeld, and Imre Kovács, the general secretary of the National Peasant Party, she reveals the hesitation of the American to support the Hungarian politicians in any way. Schoenfeld kept stressing to Kovács that members of his party should be good democrats. Kovács replied that

they would like to, but the Communists and the Russians would not allow it. “He [Schoenfeld] pondered his answer and said that we should work with the communists, be on good terms with the Russians” (p. 81).

At the end of 1946, with the peace treaty about to be signed in Paris, there was the widespread belief that the treaty would lead to the departure of the Soviet occupation troops. “Rákosi and his entourage seriously expected that, once the peace treaty entered into effect, the Soviet troops would leave Hungary” (p. 101). In her analysis of the effect on Hungarian Communists, Palasik makes clear that this was a turning point in the game of chess. Their fear that the departure of the troops would weaken their position influenced their decision to accelerate the pace of transformation to the “people’s democracy.”

The discovery in mid-December 1946 of a group called the Hungarian Brotherhood Community offered the Communists an unexpected opportunity to declare a conspiracy against the government. “Around Christmas time they became aware of the potential for a purge” (p. 101). With little evidence they created the pretence of a conspiracy. Yet, even the use of quasi-legal measures and intimidation were inadequate to remove the Communists’ main target, the popular general secretary of the Independent Smallholder Party, Béla Kovács. Despite all their efforts, the parliamentary representatives refused to remove the parliamentary immunity that protected him. Rákosi and the ACC found it necessary to call on Soviet forces to eliminate Kovács. On the evening of February 25 at the request of Rákosi and the ACC, Soviet military authorities stepped in and arrested Kovács on the charge of conspiracy.

The following trials led to the arrest of prominent leaders and the eventual destruction of the Independent Smallholders Party. Clearly political, the trial of the so-called conspiracy against the republic was the first to have received countrywide publicity. It was followed by the trial of those Social Democrats who objected to the merger of the two workers’ parties that prefigured the Communist takeover. In Palasik’s view, the trial of the Hungarian Brotherhood Community was the first show trial, long before the well-known show trials of Cardinal József Mindszenty and of the Communist László Rajk in 1949.

Palasik considers the Western powers decision not to support the application of Hungary—as well as those of Bulgaria and Romania—for membership in the United Nations the end to any hopes for democratic government in East Central Europe. She views the Western powers’ hesitation to accept Hungary’s application as essentially

surrendering the entire region to the “mercy of the Soviet Union” (p. 138). The final blow was the granting of permission for Soviet troops to remain in Hungary after the ratification of the peace treaty. From then on, with the attempted appearance of legality, “salami tactics” against the remnants of the Smallholders Party and other opposition parties intensified, with frequent resort to police intervention. By 1949-50, every institution of the democratic republic had been eliminated and the dictatorship of the Hungarian Workers’ Party established.

A major strength of Palasik’s work is in bringing to life the political game of chess being played and the maneuvering through which the Communists were able to turn events to their favor, especially through their control of the political police. She includes a number of features to make her work accessible to the Western reader, including summaries of the political parties and brief biographies of key figures. While she accords much attention to the Independent Smallholders Party—perhaps since the party has not been well known in Hungary—the Western reader might wish for a comparable explanation of the Communist Party and its leaders—not as well known in the Western world. Her frequent use of “Rákosi and gang” or “Rákosi and company” leaves the reader wondering who the other leaders were and what were their roles. How were they able to turn the workers for their purposes and how did they stage the mass protests that helped to enable them to weaken and finally decimate the Independent Smallholders leadership?

Since her analysis remains focused on the political players and parties, she offers little insight into the attitudes of the population. This lack is somewhat compensated for in a section of her final chapter, “Risk of

Freedom of Speech.” For this section, she examined documents from court proceedings against tens of thousands of people who saw fit to voice critical opinions of various matters: of the police, of Rákosi, of members of parliament, and even of the new currency. The charges were mostly the crime of agitation, and those brought before the people’s tribunals for the most part were “little” people—outspoken women, men speaking with their acquaintances, and often the poor. But the penalties were harsh. People’s tribunals sentenced the “culprits” to months or years in prison, loss of much or all of their property, and loss of civil rights. Palasik emphasizes that her research is only a sampling, since the State Security Archives alone house over twenty-three feet of relevant material, not to mention collections in provincial archives.

In her case study of a single country, Palasik makes a major contribution to our understanding of the process of Sovietization in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the changing relations between the superpowers. Through her careful research she brings to life the daily operations of the political parties, reconstructing their debates, the closed meetings of political parties, even private discussions, including those between Hungarian Communists and Soviet leaders. By highlighting the efforts of those that led the struggle to establish a multiparty democratic system, she counters the myth that communism was introduced immediately after World War II and that there was no chance for democracy. Her book will be essential reading for those interested in the unique period from 1945 to 1948 and the process by which the Communist Party came to power in Hungary.

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