

2002

Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation: Contested Memory and Social Cohesion

Karl P. Benziger

Rhode Island College, kbenziger@ric.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/facultypublications>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

Citation

Benziger, K. P. (2002). Imre nagy, martyr of the nation: Contested memory and social cohesion. *East European Quarterly*, 36(2), 171-190.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.

**IMRE NAGY, MARTYR OF THE NATION:
CONTESTED MEMORY AND SOCIAL COHESION**

Karl Philip Benziger
Rhode Island College

In June of 1996 the Hungarian Parliament passed a law that made Imre Nagy the Martyred Prime Minister of the Hungarian Nation. Nagy had been the Prime Minister of Hungary during the ill-fated Hungarian Revolution of 1956. His refusal to step down from his post in favor of János Kádár after the successful Soviet military intervention that began on November 4, 1956 had led to his condemnation as a traitor and execution on June 16, 1958. Nagy as a symbol of national sovereignty came to embody the hopes and aspirations of the Hungarian Revolution among the majority of the Hungarian people during the years of Soviet occupation. Verification of his symbolic power and significance can be seen in the popular outpouring associated with his funeral and reburial on June 16, 1989. This became one of the seminal events that led to the restoration of a sovereign Hungarian Republic, as it explicitly legitimated the demands of the opposition in their bid to unseat the Hungarian Worker's Party from power.

The seeming unity of purpose that was exhibited at the funeral soon unwound as the emergency caused by Soviet occupation and loss of national sovereignty were no longer part of the political reality of the Hungarian nation. The Parliamentary debate over the memory of Imre Nagy provided a forum for the contested memory of the Revolution as embodied by the various political factions vying for power to forcefully resurface. This article will explore how each of the major political factions then in power used the symbolic memory of Imre Nagy to legitimate a chain of history favorable to themselves. The article will further examine how this fractious debate can be seen as a discussion of Hungarian national identity, and as such, an example of how the politics of contested memory promotes social cohesion.

The Imre Nagy memory bill was proposed and introduced to the Hungarian Parliament by the Socialist Party and two members of the Free Democrats who were at that time, in coalition with the Socialists.

The Socialist Party had been formed by members of the reform faction of the Hungarian Worker's Party during the summer of 1989. The party was led by Gyula Horn, Prime Minister from 1994-1998. Gyula Horn had been a member of the Pufajkások, or Worker's Militia, initially formed by János Kádár to assist the Soviet military in his regime's demobilization strategy after the initial crushing of revolutionary resistance in Budapest in 1956. How was it then, that the party whose immediate descendants had participated in the counter-revolution and were responsible for the execution of Imre Nagy were now introducing a bill to memorialize him in concert with two of their former enemies? The answer lies in part with the history of the political factions in Parliament and their relationship to the uneasy history of 20th century Hungary.

Like the instigators of the Hungarian Revolution, the coalition partners of the Socialists and former members of the opposition, were composed of democratic socialists, such as Imre Mécs and Miklós Vásárhelyi, who were themselves former revolutionaries. Their belief in issues of social equity were coupled with a strong belief in democratic pluralism. It was Imre Nagy's belief that a Hungarian socialist utopia could be reached only by taking an economic "third way," which lay somewhere between the course laid out by the Stalinist and Capitalist economic models, that attracted followers from this movement. Pivotal to Nagy's idea was the recognition of the Hungarian National State as an authentic source of identity, which was a far cry from the "universal man," advocated by the Soviets. It was this rejection of the Soviet model that created many enemies for Nagy both in and out of the Soviet Union and at the same time endeared him to a substantial portion of the Hungarian population, most notably those in favor of democratic socialism.

It must be noted here that Imre Nagy was a communist and not particularly interested in the concept of democratic pluralism. Only slowly during the 1956 Revolution had he come to accept the idea of a democratic socialism that was advocated by the student and worker's councils before and during the Revolution.¹ It was his opposition to Stalinism and identification with the Hungarian people's economic and social needs that led to his restoration as Prime Minister of Hungary early in the morning of October 24th, 1956.

The accession to power by the Soviet backed Hungarian Communist Party in 1948 was marked by a brutality that affected well over 500,000 Hungarians who suffered arrest, interrogation, forced relocation, prison or execution. Under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, Hungary embarked on a series of disastrous economic policies that had, by the time of Stalin's death in 1953, brought Hungary to the brink of ruin. This was coupled by the imposition of Stalinist social models in which Hungarian national symbols and been subordinated to those relevant to the creation of the Soviet conception of the universal man. Hungarians seethed at the repeated affront to their national identity, let alone the reign of terror that Rákosi had unleashed against his own people.² Stalin's death created an opportunity not only for Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, but those like minded reformers of Stalin's excesses in the client States such as Hungary. Rákosi's association with the hated policies of Stalin led to his ouster from the position Prime Minister and the elevation of Imre Nagy to that post. What followed was a slowing down and in some cases reversal of Rákosi's policies.³ This was extremely difficult to accomplish because of an entrenched bureaucracy created by the Stalinists, who now patiently waited to "get even."

Nagy's reign as Prime Minister came to an end following fast upon the creation of NATO and the perceived threat that this implied to the Soviet Union. Rákosi who had been attempting to engineer Nagy's downfall now received the support of the conservative members of the Soviet Politburo who worried that Nagy's advocacy of a unique Hungarian path to socialism could undermine the Soviet's hold on Hungary and thus undermine an important element of the Soviet's defense strategy against an attack by NATO forces. Nagy was forced from office in late 1955 and kicked out of the Hungarian Communist Party.⁴

Nagy's reforms, which included an ending, or at least severe curtailing of State terror, had undermined an important element of Rákosi's ability to manipulate the Hungarian people. Writer's circles which had freely discussed ideas embodied in Nagy's reforms continued to meet. Circles including writers and students were soon formed at Hungary's major universities. The attempted re-imposition of Stalinism created a dichotomy between the reforms of Nagy and official government policy. The writers' circles began openly calling

for the return of Nagy to power. As the economic situation worsened and the unwillingness of Hungarians to accept Rákosi as legitimate became clear, students began to radicalize the person of Imre Nagy. Nagy was associated not only with his reforms, which included an affirmation of national identity, but with the democratic reforms of the Hungarian Revolutionaries of 1848. The Soviets sensing the danger of the situation removed Rákosi from power in the summer of 1956, but allowed another Stalinist, Ernő Gerő to take his place, which did nothing to ameliorate the situation.

The funeral of László Rajk, a former head of State security on October 6, 1956, who had been a victim of one of Rákosi's purges provided the Hungarian people with a reason and place to express their abhorrence with the policies of Rákosi and his Stalinist successor. The association of the Stalinists with the terror and rejection of Hungarian national identity created fertile ground for the events that followed.

The forceful street demonstrations orchestrated by the students on October 23rd, 1956, had created the impetus for the mobilization of the Hungarian people and made it all but certain that Nagy would be restored to his office. What was interesting was that the Nagy that the protesters were demanding be returned to power was more akin to a Revolutionary hero of 1848, rather than the Nagy who spoke to the protesters that evening at the Parliament building.

Nagy's ascension to power was made possible by the Stalinist government under the supervision of the Soviets in a bid to restore stability to Hungary. In a compromise made during negotiations, Nagy would share power with members of the former government in a coalition. The former Prime Minister, Ernő Gerő, a Stalinist, along with reformers such as János Kádár and András Hegedüs would share power with Nagy. Eager to end the violence and restore order, Nagy, much to the disappointment of the protesters, ordered the Revolutionaries to lay down their arms and return home. Nagy's appeal went unheeded and ultimately led to Gerő and Hegedüs, who were eager to follow the wishes of the Soviet ambassadors in Budapest, to issue a formal request for Soviet intervention to quell the unrest.⁵

Nagy's hesitation to use force only increased the reservations that the conservative members of his government had for him, let alone the Soviets. On the other hand, his decision not to call on Soviet inter-

vention or request forceful action by the Hungarian military or police to quell the unrest, allowed him to maintain legitimacy with the Revolutionaries.

It was only on October 30, after considerable pressure from revolutionaries such as Géza Losonczy, that Nagy officially acceded to the goals of the Revolution and Hungarian people. Nagy reformed his government to reflect his commitment to democratic pluralism. His commitment can be seen in his decision to include Zoltán Tildy, who was the former leader of the Smallholders Party prior to the Stalinist coup of 1948. The Smallholders Party was a peasants party with strong nationalist leanings. Tildy's inclusion signaled the reemergence of non-socialist factions into the Hungarian political system. Conservative Roman Catholics, such as Cardinal Mindszenty, wanted a return to a Hungarian political scene more akin to what it was prior to WW II. To these political factions it was Zoltán Tildy not the Muscovite Imre Nagy who would be a better choice as Prime Minister.⁶ How this factional dispute would have been resolved is impossible to determine given the Soviet intervention early on the morning of November 4 which heralded the beginning of the Khrushchev sanctioned regime of János Kádár.

The communist non-communist dispute was not forgotten however and was explicit within the opposition to the communist regime prior to and after the establishment of the Republic of Hungary. The strongest party to emerge from the opposition to the Hungarian Workers Party prior to the establishment of the Republic, The Hungarian Democratic Forum, won the majority of seats in the First Parliament, which resulted in József Antall becoming the first Prime Minister in 1990. The Hungarian Democratic Forum, known as the MDF, was a coalition party dominated by a strong conservative faction. The infighting between the various parties that made up the former opposition to the communist regime began almost immediately with the writing of the First Act of Parliament, which officially recognized the 1956 Revolution as a War of Independence.

The original drafting of the bill had recognized Imre Nagy as the symbolic leader and embodiment of the Revolution. In addition, the bill named the perpetrators of the terror that followed the Soviet backed counter-revolution. In many ways the bill reflected the Hungarian people's rejection of the communist regime and recognized in

law what the Hungarian people had already decided by their presence at the funeral of Imre Nagy; namely that he had died for a sovereign Hungarian State.

In an interesting twist, Antall and the committee responsible for preparing the final draft of the bill led by the nationalist playwright, István Csurka, decided to rewrite history in order to legitimate their factional understanding of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. In the final writing of the draft, they removed Nagy's name as well as the name of the perpetrators.⁷ This, in turn, accomplished two purposes. First, for conservatives such as Csurka and Antall, the communist period had been an aberration. By eliminating Nagy's name they hoped to ultimately memorialize Zoltán Tildy as a non-communist who had been associated both with the politics of the Miklós Horthy government and the freely elected government dominated by the Smallholders between 1945 and 1948. Secondly, removal of the names of the perpetrators allowed those who had collaborated with the former government to free themselves from the possibility of being associated with the more odious elements of the former communist regime. István Csurka, for example, had collaborated with the previous government by acting as an informer. Csurka continues to deny both the allegation that he rewrote the bill and that he had collaborated with the previous government.

The "casting off" of the symbolic image of Imre Nagy enraged members within the MDF faction, as well as the Free Democrats. The other parties who had sponsored the bill were left with the choice of either voting up or down. Miklós Vásárhelyi claimed that he only had seconds to decide how to vote. The vote was further complicated according to Vásárhelyi because, "we were concerned with the prestige of the Hungarian government in front of the diplomatic corps."⁸ According to Imre Mécs, it was this incident coupled with the later debate over the Hungarian Coat of Arms that began an "unholy" coalition between the Socialists and the Free Democrats.⁹

The Coat of Arms debate along with the reburial of Miklós Horthy seemed to confirm the idea that the MDF was attempting to rewrite the a period of Hungarian 20th century history that resonated with only a minority of Hungarians. Miklós Horthy had staged a coup against the post World War I communist government of Béla Kun. Under Horthy's semi-authoritarian government communism was out-

lawed. In a bid to restore Hungarian territory lost under the terms of the Treaty of Trianon, alliances were formed with the fascist governments of Nazi Germany and Italy. In the late thirties anti-Semitic laws were passed and in many ways the path for the ascension of the Hungarian fascist party, the Arrow Cross, were laid. The Horthy government had been condemned by both the socialists and the Free Democrats as both fascist and responsible in large part for the defeat and destruction of Hungary in World War II.

The coat of arms debate centered on whether Hungary would use a coat of arms that included heraldry that explicitly linked Hungary to the Hungarian medieval kingdom founded by King Stephen in the 11th century, or the coat of arms adopted by the Hungarian revolutionaries of 1848, commonly known as the Kossuth coat of arms. The Kossuth coat of arms was designed to accommodate Hungary's new status as a democracy by the symbolic absence of the crown of St. Stephen. This was the coat of arms favored by both the Free Democrats and the Socialists. The MDF and Smallholder party favored the more ancient version that acknowledged their conception of the long history of the Hungarian State. The problem again centered on the fact that the earlier version was also associated with the Horthy regime. For the Free Democrats and the Socialists the ancient symbolism had been tainted by its association with the pre-fascist government of Miklós Horthy.

What was perhaps most damning for the MDF was the seeming distance it placed between itself and the welfare of the Hungarian people. In the wake of massive unemployment caused by the closing of many of the failed large scale enterprises started by the communists, Antall said, "let the rotten apples fall." The fact that close to one million workers in a population of only 10 million seemed appallingly brutal to many Hungarians.¹⁰ Hungarians watched helplessly as their social reality premised on a welfare state was seriously eroded. It was little wonder then that in 1994, in light of the perception that the Hungarian people had been betrayed a second time that the socialists were voted into power. The Socialists made formal their uneasy truce with the Free Democrats by inviting them into a coalition government.

Imre Nagy had come to represent a charismatic figure who represented not only democratic sovereignty, but the "just" third way

between unregulated capitalism and socialism. The discarding of Nagy had allowed the Socialist party to capture his symbolic figure and propose legislation that would legitimate a chain of history suitable to themselves. The Socialists needed the symbolic image of Imre Nagy. Their return to power in 1994 was in part predicated on the Hungarian people's expectations that they would be better guardians of their social security than the Hungarian Democratic Forum. The socialist Party needed something more to stay in power, as the economic troubles of Hungary were far from over and could pose a formidable threat to any party in power. As Imre Nagy was recognized as a symbol of national sovereignty, the Socialist Party thought it necessary to gain legitimacy with the Hungarian people in regard to Nagy and the 1956 Revolution. The job of appropriating Imre Nagy to be the symbol of national and social renewal was made easier by the fact that the MDF had provided "the opening" by jettisoning his name from the First Act of Parliament in 1990.

By introducing the Imre Nagy memory bill onto the floor of the Parliament, the Socialists were able to incorporate Nagy into their particular construction of history that would at once legitimize the Party and most importantly, disassociate themselves from the less palatable aspects of Communist rule. In addition, by expropriating the symbol of Nagy from the opposition, the Socialists could diffuse the opposition's claims that they were the inheritors of the Communists "mantle," which linked them of the suppression of the 1956 Revolution. Imre Szekeres in his introduction of the bill on the floor of the Parliament, likened the transformation of the Socialist Party from the Hungarian Workers Party to that of Paul. The use of Christian symbols, such as Paul's conversion to Christianity, was an attempt to demonstrate a break with the Communist past, as well as the symbolic ability of humans to renew themselves both spiritually and morally. This transformation was coupled with references to the explicit break with the Stalinist past of Mátyás Rákosi, by claiming to be associated with the early reforms of Imre Nagy in 1953. As has been mentioned earlier, Stalinism was seen as an imported ideology which had severe consequences for the Hungarian population.¹¹

The Free Democrats as a party broke ranks with its coalition partner, with the exception of Imre Mécs and Péter Zwack, over this bill and led the response to the proposed legislation. Aliz Halda explained

that the various memorial bills that had been passed by the Parliament had included not Hungarian heroes, but personages odious to the Hungarian democracy such as Joseph Stalin and Franz Joseph.¹² According to Halda, Hungarians should be free to memorialize whom they wished. To legislate the memorialization of a political figure smacked of political coercion and was not appropriate in a democratic State. They further claimed that Imre Nagy would never have wanted his name associated with this type of legislation. It would be better for the country as a whole to simply drop the proposed legislation than to carry on a legislative tradition that had been corrupted by the politics of the moment. For the majority of Free Democrats who had been in the forefront of dissent to the communist regime prior to 1989, a memorialization of Imre Nagy by many of those who were responsible for the destruction of the Revolution that they had taken part was unpalatable. More importantly, the Imre Nagy that they attached themselves to, was interested in creating a modern Hungarian State.¹³ Memorial bills in general, smacked too much of the old order, whether that of the Stalinists or the regime of Miklós Horthy.

The Smallholders, MDF and the Young Democrats (FIDESZ), opposed the bill on different grounds. FIDESZ was originally a student's party which had begun to broaden its political base during the first four years of the Republic. In an interesting parliamentary maneuver, Ottó Sándorffy of the Smallholders Party connected Imre Nagy to the martyrs of the 1956 Revolution who had been executed by the Kádár regime as part of its demobilization strategy. In a stirring speech, Sándorffy compared the Hungarian people's demand for the restoration of Imre Nagy as Prime Minister on October 23, 1956 to the acclamation of King Matthias Corvinus by the Hungarian people and their lords and bishops in January of 1458. Sándorffy then linked Nagy to the Hungarian people by stating that Nagy knew that his communist comrades would "never forgive his choice to be Hungarian" in reference to both Nagy's ultimate joining with the ideals of the Revolution and his final decision to go to the gallows rather than step down as Prime Minister and betray the Revolution in 1958. Sándorffy continued by stating that Nagy would never have wanted to be separated from the Revolutionaries who also gave their lives for the Revolution and proceeded to read the names of the martyrs into the minutes of Parliament.¹⁴ *Kegyeleti* tradition in Hungary demands

respect for the dead, and so, the entire Parliament stood as the names were read which took the rest of the afternoon and early morning of the next day.¹⁵ Sándorffy then stated that the Smallholders would support the bill as long all 405 names were included along with Nagy's name in the bill. In an interview with Sándorffy, he stated that he had purposely read the names in order to ensure that the martyrs were properly memorialized even though he realized at the time that his amendment to the bill was sure to be defeated.¹⁶

The Socialists were greatly angered by this maneuver and responded by stating that one of the names that had been read by Sándorffy, Francia Kis was in fact a former fascist and anti-Semite. The Socialists objections began to sound similar to the apologies given by the Kádár regime as to why the counter-revolution was necessary. Throughout textbooks from the Kádár era a distinction is made between the students of October 23 and the coalition of fascists and capitalists who wanted to overturn the Socialist state. The Smallholder Party and MDF both included factions who felt that the former Horthy government had been legitimate and that the anti-Semitic excesses, in regard to legislation from the 1930's was excusable in light of Germany and Italy's support of Hungary's demand that land that had been taken away by the Treaty of Trianon should be restored to the Hungarian State. As mentioned earlier these political factions had existed during the 1956 Revolution, but had not had time to mature. According to the historian János M. Rainer the Revolution remained largely in the hands of the democratic socialists.¹⁷ By including the names of those Revolutionaries who were anti communist, Sándorffy attaches Nagy to a Hungarian identity that claims its origins with the founding of the medieval Hungarian kingdom of St. Stephen rather than the "imported" Soviet identity that the Socialists wished to link with Nagy.

FIDESZ and the MDF joined the Smallholders in their demands that the martyrs be included in the bill. The speeches given by both parties continued the opposition's blistering attack on the Socialists, which as at the funeral of Imre Nagy, linked the Socialists to the Kádár regime and the suzerainty of the former Soviet Union. Miklós Csapody of the MDF demanded that the Socialists apologize for the brutality of Kádár's terror and the Soviet backed repression of the Revolution. Responding to the charges that the opposition wished to

memorialize fascists among the martyrs, Csapody compared the Pufajkások to the police of Nazi Germany.¹⁸ FIDESZ reiterated its claims made at the funeral of Imre Nagy that the Socialists were responsible not only for the death of the martyrs, but also the death of civic society in Hungary.¹⁹ Both parties explicitly associated the Socialists with foreign Soviet influence by using the terms Mongols and Tatars to describe the communists and by connection the Socialists. The Mongols (called Tatars by the people of Central Europe) had laid waste to much of Hungary in the mid-13th century.

The debate grew more and more rancorous as the charges of collaboration with communist and fascists once again rose to the surface. During the detailed debate the Free Democrats seemed to retreat from their earlier stance against the bill and joined the opposition by proposing that not only should the names of the martyrs be included, but also those who had perpetrated the crimes against Imre Nagy and the martyrs.²⁰ The opposition, including the MDF, was now demanding what had been deleted from the First Act of Parliament be restored in the context of the Memorial bill. Imre Mécsek also broke with the Socialists during the debate by demanding that the names of the martyrs be included. The coalition that had brought the communist government down in 1989 had for a moment been restored over what they considered to be a dangerous revision of history by many of those who had been their bitter enemies only seven years previous.

The end result of the debate was a forgone conclusion however and with the Socialist majority in Parliament the bill passed on June 26, 1996, with a Socialist majority of 165. In an ironic twist, Imre Nagy was now being honored by the party most closely associated with the communist authoritarian government of János Kádár. The "capture" of Nagy as a symbol had been made possible by the last minute coup of the conservative faction of the MDF, previously angered by the dominance of the democratic socialists embodied by the Free Democrats during the years of protest against the Kádár and the later reform communist regimes. The non-communists had always been uneasy partners with the Nagy faction during the Revolution. For them communism had always been and remained, anathema to their concept of a Hungarian State. The Socialists recognized the importance of Nagy as a symbol of national sovereignty rather than as a symbol of one particular party. This is more in accord with the

Hungarian people's own beliefs about Imre Nagy. Though his communist past makes him a contested symbol, very few Hungarians would argue that Nagy by his final actions during the Revolution and later in 1958 made him a martyr of the Hungarian nation.

By acknowledging the legitimacy of the Hungarian Revolution and Imre Nagy as its leader, the Socialists acknowledge the illegality of his execution as, "a sin screaming to heaven." In the socialist telling of the story, Kádár's terror is "skipped over" with the obvious exception of Imre Nagy's execution. This, combined with an attack on those who executed communists during the Revolution (this is a reference to the lynching of communist officials that occurred during the Revolution) allowed the Socialists to explain why some of their members, most notably Gyula Horn, became members of the Pufajkások in order to "restore order." By linking revenge and murder to both Imre Nagy and those innocent communists who were lynched, the Socialists leave out the rest of the story of Kádár's terror. The memorialization implicitly becomes a reconciliation between those who were associated with the Revolution and those associated with communism. This attempt at reconciliation is not dissimilar to James Young's concept about holocaust memorialization in the former East Germany, where it was primarily the Communists who were memorialized as victims along with the Jews, with little or no accounting for those who had perpetrated the crimes. In this case, the perpetrators of the holocaust are "hidden" by the fact that the East German State was a communist state. Since the communists were the enemies of the Nazis, this new state had no need to examine its past except in heroic terms, in which resistance and the eventual triumph of Communism were the focal points of commemoration.²¹

The Socialists claimed further legitimacy by linking Nagy to the national heroes of Rákóczi, Kossuth and Bajcsy-Zsilinszky. Each figure is associated with fighting for Hungarian national sovereignty and in the case of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky is associated with fighting against fascism. This is particularly important in this debate, as the Hungarian Democratic Forum, which was in power from 1990-94, attempted to memorialize Admiral Miklós Horthy, who led a right wing coalition dictatorship in Hungary from 1920-1944. They did so, by bringing the deposed dictator back from Portugal and reburying him in Hungary. The reburial was largely regarded as a failure, as it was seen as an

unnecessary distraction from the problems of the Hungarian economy. In addition, he was labeled a fascist by the former communist government, due to his alliance with the fascist powers before and during WW II. By associating Bajcsy-Zsilinszky with Imre Nagy, the Socialists implicitly linked the Hungarian Democratic Forum to Admiral Horthy and the failure of WW II.

The Imre Nagy memory bill served the Socialists as a way of rationalizing their association with communism and how this association ultimately led to Hungarian national sovereignty through the sacrifice of patriots such as Imre Nagy and the reform communists. In this version of events, the period of reform communism, begun by Imre Nagy was a necessary step in the progression to Hungarian national sovereignty after WW II. Democratic socialism coupled with the implicit promise of finding an economic "third way" becomes the fulfillment of Nagy's legacy. By emphasizing that innocent blood was shed on both sides during the 1956 Revolution, the Socialists create a more broad based memorialization, in which issues of collaboration and guilt are softened in order that a common memorialization can be facilitated. This in turn, serves to both strengthen national unity and the Socialist Party at the same time.

Conversely, the opposition parties saw the Socialist proposal of the Imre Nagy memory bill as an "opportunistic" attempt to shape political opinion and further legitimize their standing with the Hungarian people. Perhaps, according to these parties, even more disturbing was the common memorialization that was implied, which would "side-step" issues of guilt and collaboration. In order to counter the Socialist position, the opposition needed to link the Socialists to the reform communists and re-emphasize how the revolution had been shaped by the Hungarian people who had ultimately "forced Nagy's hand" in accepting the goals they had laid out, which included the role Nagy was to play.

By emphasizing October 23, 1956, the first day of the Hungarian Revolution, the opposition focused on the power of the Hungarian people in the leading and shaping of events to come. On the evening of the 23, they argued, the Hungarian people clearly rejected Soviet backed communist authoritarian rule. In an often quoted scene that took place in front of the Hungarian Parliament on that evening, Imre Nagy is reported to have begun his address to the demonstrators with:

"My comrades," at which point the crowd shouted, "No more comrades." To this Nagy started again with, "my dear Hungarian brethren," to which the crowd replied, "that's better." Nagy's attempts to calm the crowd with assurances that he would negotiate their demands with the Central Committee went unheeded by the demonstrators, as Nagy at that point didn't realize how serious the Hungarians were in regard to their demands. They demonstrated this later that evening by tearing down the statue of Stalin and launching an assault on the State Radio Station. By the time the AVH (state security police) began firing on the crowds in front of the radio station, the Revolution had begun.²²

This historical construction fits in well with the concept that Imre Nagy's image as the "ideal" Prime Minister who executed the demands for reform that had been created for him by the university students in Szeged and later in Budapest. The opposition argued, that it was only several days later that Nagy had actually "joined the revolution" by accepting the demands for a democratic sovereign state and began to fulfil the "role" set out for him by the revolutionaries. According to the opposition in Parliament, Nagy was a "follower of events," who acted only when it was obvious that the demands of the Revolutionaries were also those of the general populace. It is this Imre Nagy, who had broken with the communist party, that the opposition focused on and by so doing separated him from those reform communists who did not follow his lead and join the revolution.

Charges of collaboration were brought against those who had sided with János Kádár, such as the former Prime Minister Gyula Horn. For the first part of his demobilization strategy, Kádár had had to rely on his Worker's Militia (Pufajkások) backed by Soviet troops to carry out the initial stages of the terror that were instituted after November 4, as well as to put down worker council strikes and demonstrations that continued through the end of January, 1957. The terror was brutal and exacted a heavy toll on the Hungarian population. The reading of the revolutionary "martyrs" names into the parliamentary minutes by Ottó Sándorffy of the Smallholders Party into the Parliamentary minutes reinforced charges of collaboration and demonstrated that the Socialists still found the Revolution of 1956 and opposition activities prior to 1989 difficult to reconcile and defend.

Symbolically, the reading of the martyrs names into the Parliamentary minutes recalled both the demands of the opposition prior to 1989 (these demands included an official accounting and proper reburial of the victims), as well as what was considered to be one of the most poignant forms of the then, illegal protest, in which the names of the "martyrs" were read aloud in public, such as the protest at the Batthyány Eternal Light Monument in Budapest on June 16, 1988. These forms of protest were consonant with the Hungarian peoples feelings, who had been shocked not only at the brutality of Kádár's terror, but by the later revelations of the purposeful desecration of the graves of Nagy and the other martyrs.²³ By bringing the issues of collaboration into the debate, the opposition hoped to again draw the line between those who had legitimately carried the "torch" of the 1956 Revolution for the Hungarian people and those who had attempted to portray these events as a counter-revolution.

Within the opposition, the various parties points of view clashed over issues of what they considered to be an authentic conception of the Hungarian State, however they all agreed on a Hungarian nationalism that separated itself from the "other." For example, the Smallholders referred back to the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary and compared Imre Nagy's second Prime Ministership to the accession to the throne of Matthias Corvinus by acclamation of the Lords and finally the Hungarian people. In this conception of Imre Nagy, he chooses his Hungarian identity over Communism, which is explicitly portrayed as being foreign. The Young Democrats and the Hungarian Democratic Forum quoting Viktor Orbán and Albert Camus respectively portray the Communists as "Asians" or "Mongols," both in reference to the Mongol invasions that swept over Hungary in the 13th century. Camus went further in his portrayal of communists, by portraying the Soviets as Mongols and the Hungarian communists as the "Tatars" (the Central European name for the Mongols).

The chain of history created by each party within the opposition is slightly different, but when put together, they combine to create a "damning chain of events" that links the Socialists not only to the Kádár regime, but to Rákosi's Stalinist regime. The communists are portrayed as having had to "destroy civic society" in order to gain power in 1948. Issues of collaboration are raised in regard to the counter-revolution and participation in the Worker's Militia and the

trial of Imre Nagy. The issues regarding the reform communist's refusal to accept the legitimacy of the 1956 Revolution are again brought into play with the reading of the Martyr's names into the parliamentary minutes and the evocation of protest and outrage that took place in the 1980's. Memorialization as conceived by the opposition includes naming the perpetrators and their victims. This in turn allows those who took part and suffered in the struggle to assume heroic characterization, while damning those associated with collaboration with the counter-revolution, thus all victims become martyrs whether justly or not. In this light, accepting a common memorialization would be to accept a chain of history that would be anathema to those who both fought in the Revolution and the hundreds of thousands that were negatively affected by its repression.

The common ground that Imre Mécs proposed, in which he was willing to support the bill, but unwilling to deny those responsible for the Revolution's repression their due responsibility, seems not to have been seriously considered by his fellow Parliamentarians. This is indicative of the contested memory surrounding Imre Nagy and the deep divisions between those who still maintain power within the system and owe their fortunes to the former communist government and those who actively fought against the former authoritarian regime. This is similar to the Memorial movement in Russia, in which conflicted feelings regarding Joseph Stalin quickly came to light when a campaign to memorialize his victims was started in 1991. This movement encountered a great deal of resistance in regard to compiling lists of victims and reversing court judgements against the victims, as many of the people working within the bureaucracy viewed Stalin as the leader who had enabled them to rise out of poverty and into a professional position.²⁴ A memorialization that names perpetrators or accepts responsibilities for the past may come too close to those who are still in positions of responsibility in Hungary. As indicated by the news stories that came out prior to the debate, collaboration is a dangerous game for some politicians within the opposition, as revealed by the stories of parental collaboration with the AVH, or special treatment that was accorded dissidents whose parents worked for the communist party.

It is significant that during the entire debate, no one challenged the idea that Imre Nagy was a national symbol who represented the

concept of a sovereign Hungarian nation. His patriotism in the face of adversity was recognized, at least by this body, as something that all Hungarians should emulate. What is contested however, is the history that surrounds Imre Nagy and the association of the various political parties to these momentous events that Imre Nagy symbolizes.

The Revolution and memories of Imre Nagy continue to resonate in the Hungarian consciousness and though it has become fashionable among some circles to dismiss the discussion of the Revolution as an event that no longer resonates with the Hungarian people, observation of the sites of memorial demonstrates that this is simply not so. For example, on October 23, 1997 Hungarians, rather than gather at any one single place, visited and memorialized different sites related to the 1956 Revolution such as Plot 301 in the Public Cemetery of Budapest, where the martyrs of the terror are buried, the official state sponsored ceremony in front of the Parliament building, or the ceremony at the Corvin Pass sponsored in part by the Political Prisoners Association. Some of these visits were coupled with participation in a political event, sponsored by the differing political parties, while other visits seemed to ignore the political ceremonies and represented a more personal reflection of this historic event. Flowers were left and candles were lit at these various locus points and very much reflected the process of memorialization (*kegyelet*) demonstrated by the Hungarian people at the funeral of Imre Nagy.

It is the connection between this very personal memorial that informs daily social life of the Hungarians both at funerals and on occasions such as the Day of the Dead that is commonly overlooked by political interests.²⁵ In a modern complex society such as Hungary, the daily needs of eking out a living in the face of the very serious economic challenges brought about by the economic transition of late take precedence over discussion of issues such as national identity. Without a state of emergency to respond to, such as that which existed at the time of Imre Nagy's funeral in 1989, the Hungarian people have no need to gather, instead the norms of every day existence take precedence. Part of this every day social life which is practiced by the majority of Hungarians are the rituals that surround and inform the memorialization of the dead. The martyrs of the Revolution which include Imre Nagy are honored as part of the community of Hungarians. As long as the concept of sovereignty is not challenged, how

the symbolic meaning of Nagy is conditioned by the political factions in Hungary is not central to this process.

The imagined community that is projected by the various political factions operating in Hungary create a chain of history that link Hungarians to a past that creates stability for the various political factions and communities extant in Hungary today. Sovereignty is not challenged, and so, the luxury of peace allows for an open contest in regard to Hungary's past. Since memorialization plays such a major role in Hungarian political and social identity, history provides the vehicle for political conversation. As the question of national sovereignty is not raised, contentious political dialogue with a variety of interpretations allows for each faction to "buy into" the debate while at the same time claiming a conception of Hungarian history as their own. This in turn, reinforces stability within Hungarian society and concurrently aids in the development of the democratic process. Conversely, in times of emergency when sovereignty is threatened a seeming solidarity of the collective conscience appears to present a unified front in order to clearly define what is legitimate to Hungarian identity, as in the case of Imre Nagy's funeral.

Discussion of 20th century Hungarian history can not be had without a discussion of the Revolution of 1956 and Imre Nagy. We have seen how relationship to Imre Nagy is fundamental to the construction of this history. His association as a symbol is deeply connected to issues of national sovereignty and therefore to the essence of Hungarian identity itself, ensuring that a discussion of Nagy as a national symbol will in essence, become a discussion about Hungarian identity. Whether it be in the context of a tumultuous debate or the gentle ringing of the soul bell that is situated in front of the grave of Imre Nagy and the tomb of the unknown revolutionary, the debate over Imre Nagy and the 1956 Revolution will continue among Hungarians well into the next century and beyond.

NOTES

1. This ideal is reflected in the student demands of October 23, 1956 and Workers Councils manifestos supporting these demands. Bill Lomax, *Hungarian Workers Councils in 1956* (Highland Lakes: Columbia University Press, 1990), 5.
2. George Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 93, 101.
3. György Litván, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1996), 21. János M. Rainer provides an extensive account of Nagy's ideas regarding agricultural reform in his magnificent book, *Nagy Imre: Politikai életrajz*, vol. 1 (Imre Nagy: A Political Biography) (Budapest: 1956; Intézet, 1996).
4. Litván, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, 31.
5. According to Hegedüs, the Soviet representative, Juri Andropov, kept following Nagy around his office with the request for Soviet intervention in his hand. Nagy kept carefully avoiding Andropov, so he would be unable to hand Nagy the message. András Hegedüs, *A Történelem és a Hatalam Igézetében* (Within the Fascination of History and Power) (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1988), 191.
6. For a more detailed analysis of this non-communist faction see: Charles Gati, "From Liberation to Revolution," *A History of Hungary*, ed. Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, Tibor Frank (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 380, 382. József Mindszenty, *Emlékirataim* (My Memoirs) (Budapest: Az Apostoli Szentszék Könyvkiadó, 1989), 436. Litván, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, 76.
7. Gábor Murányi, "Második helyben futás/Törvények Nagy Imréről" (Running in Place for a Second Time), *Heti Világgazdaság* 12 (24 March 1996): 94.
8. Miklós Vásárhelyi, interview by author, Budapest, Hungary, 7 October 1997.
9. Imre Mécs, interview by author, Budapest, Hungary, 7 November 1997.
10. László Szamuely, "The Costs of Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 37 (Winter, 1996): 67.
11. Az Országgyűlés (hereafter The Minutes of Parliament): tavaszi ülészakának 41. Ülésnapja 1996, Június 3-án, hétfőn, 21200.
12. Franz Joseph was the emperor of Austria-Hungary from 1830-1916.
13. The Minutes of Parliament, 21202-21202.
14. *Ibid.*, 21203.
15. *Kegyélet* is synonymous with Durkheim's concept of piacular rites and is defined as duty towards the dead, but the concept embraced by the word expresses the entire range of piaculum as practiced in Hungarian culture such as funeral rites (although these vary between, Roman Catholics Protestants and Jews), memorialization and days of remembrance. Hungarians often use Antigone's obligation to her brother in explaining the coercive power of these rituals. Karl P. Benziger, "The Funeral of Imre Nagy and the Power of Memory Culture," *History and Memory*, 12, 2, 2000.
16. Ottó Sándorffy, interview by author, Budapest, 16 September 1997.
17. János M. Rainer, interview by author, Budapest, 2 June 1998.
18. The Minutes of Parliament. Június 4-én, kedden 21317-21318.
19. *Ibid.*, 21327.
20. The Minutes of Parliament, Június 11-én kedden 22073-22074.
21. James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 17.

22. János Kis, *Politics in Hungary: For a Democratic Alternative* (Highland Park: Columbia University Press, 1989), 25.

23. Béla Kövér, "301-es parcella Köztemető," *Magyar Nemzet*, 3 May 1989, p. 21. Béla Lipták, "Searching for the Grave of Imre Nagy," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 October 1985. F-520 Radio Free Europe.

24. A. D'Agostino, "Stalin Old and New," *The Russian Review* 54, 3 (July, 1995): 451.

25. The Hungarian Day of the Dead corresponds to All Souls Day in the Roman Catholic calendar. Throughout the days and weeks surrounding All Souls day, Hungarian cemeteries become living cities of the dead as thousands of Hungarians come to care for the grave mounds and remember the deceased. Benziger, "The Funeral of Imre Nagy."