
Introduction

Modern wars and revolutions are frequently accompanied by massive displacement of civilians. Scholars often note the role of political refugees in radical politics, but rarely investigate the causes of their radicalism. This study examines the radicalization of one group of political refugees: the displaced Hungarian nationals, who, after 1918, fled or were expelled from territories seized by the Successor States of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Some fled their native lands in fear for their lives; others left for political or economic reasons. The new regimes of the Successor States actively encouraged their departure and, at times, resorted to outright expulsion.

The study has three basic objectives: first, to establish the causes of the refugee problem and to identify the social background of refugees; then, to analyze the process of the refugees' psychological and political radicalization and their role in the counterrevolutionary movement; and, finally, to examine the social and political assimilation of the refugees and its cost to Hungarian society.

I take the view that radicalization of the refugees was not a psychological, or at least not a purely psychological, phenomenon, but primarily a historical one. Even before the war those who later became refugees were subjected to stress; after the war they experienced extreme psychological trauma. As members of the dominant middle and upper classes of prewar Hungarian society they lived amidst a growing sense of crisis. The end of the war brought physical violence against them in occupied areas, and loss of landed estates, government posts, and prewar social status. The fall from privilege traumatized and psychologically primed the refugees for radical action. But, to understand the process of their radicalization, the tools of psychology, though useful, are inadequate in themselves. It was a complex historical process: the result of a constant interaction between the social backgrounds and personal experiences of the refugees and the general historical developments both within Hungary and in the whole of East Central Europe. Hence, it is necessary to place their story within the context of the dramatic and revolutionary events of the period. From the point of view of their radicalization the day-to-day changes in the official refugee policies of the successive Hungarian governments were of lesser import-

ance. In its stead, therefore, I stress those broader economic and political trends which had an effect on the lives and mentality of the refugees.

Although postwar events were catalytic, we must seek the origins of right-wing radicalization of the refugees in the prewar crisis of the Hungarian middle class, the class best represented among the refugees.

The key to an understanding of that growing sense of crisis is the character and history of the Hungarian middle class. Unlike the middle classes of Western Europe, the Hungarian middle class was not exclusively bourgeois, but rather gentry in origin, and the thin stratum of non-nobles was, in great part, not Hungarian but German and Jewish. Classical middle-class or bourgeois ideologies and interests, therefore, were easily subordinated to those of the gentry. In spite of temporary successes during the dualist era, it was a declining class. Each step toward a modern and democratic Hungary strengthened the non-noble classes and threatened the political power and social status of the gentry. More than anything else, the fear of loss of status and control of society forced the gentry-dominated middle class to block the country's natural political evolution by opposing necessary social and political reforms.

In a microcosm the refugees represented a cross section of the prewar political elite: landed and propertyless nobles, gentry officers, state and local officials, magnates and large-estate owners. Their attitudes and world views were identical with those of their peers in all parts of the kingdom. But even before the war those who lived in the minority areas — where social conflict was always aggravated by national tensions — were more acutely aware of the contradictions and crisis of society and felt more endangered as a class. Not surprisingly, they were more prepared to seek and embrace radical solutions. Thus, the experiences of the refugees show more clearly the continuity between the prewar crisis and the postwar radicalization of the gentry middle class.

The war and subsequent events polarized society, traumatizing every class, especially the refugees. Count István Bethlen, the conservative prime minister of Hungary (1921–31) and a leader of the refugees, may not have been far from the mark when, in 1923, he declared: "The dismemberment of the country, its defeat during the World War, the repeated revolutions and foreign occupation — all created a trauma of a magnitude unmatched in the history of this nation and unparalleled in other nations, even during the World War."¹ The counterrevolutionary movement arose in opposition to all these factors. The counterrevolutionaries rejected not only the reforms of the democratic and communist regimes but also wished to reverse the consequences of the lost war. The

refugees, as the most traumatized group in the country, eagerly participated in the movement. They discovered in it the only chance for Hungary to recover lost territories and, thus, to assure their own economic and social restoration.

During the immediate postwar period, however, the future looked bleak for the refugees and for the traditional ruling elite. Even a few months before the victory of the counterrevolution, a takeover of Hungary by the radical right seemed fantastic. After the October 1918 revolution, the right was both defeated and discredited. The reins of government were solidly in the hands of the democratic left. Political issues favored by the refugees, such as defense of the interests of the traditional ruling classes and military resistance to Hungary's partition, were opposed by the population at large. Public sentiment turned away, in revulsion, from a resumption of military hostilities and, instead, focused on long-delayed social and economic reforms. Yet, in August 1919, with Western aid the former ruling classes of Hungary were restored. But even at the moment of its triumph Admiral Miklós Horthy's counterrevolutionary army was puny; its active domestic supporters represented only a fraction of the population. Indeed, Horthy's seizure of power seemed opportunistic and made possible only by the momentary chaos and in the political vacuum that was left in the wake of the Hungarian Soviet Republic's defeat. Yet, for a quarter-century the Horthy regime remained firmly entrenched and met defeat only during the closing month of World War II.

The reasons for the regime's successes and for those of the refugees are far too complex to be examined here in detail. We can briefly focus our attention only on the two most significant developments which had the most fundamental and lasting impact upon the region and which placed the political program of the refugees at the center stage of Hungary's political life. One, the Russian Revolution forced an adjustment in previous political and ideological equations; it changed the priorities of the Western democracies. Two, the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the partition of Hungary reduced the political weight of domestic social and economic issues and increased those of territorial, national, and military considerations.

Until 1918 the West was shielded from the impact of events in Russia by the armies of the Central Powers. But in November 1918 that shield was removed, and the revolutions which swept through Germany and Austria-Hungary brought the threat of Bolshevism to the doorsteps of France. With the success of the Russian Revolution liberal democracy ceased to be the only alternative to conservatism. To some the new soviet political system appeared to be an exciting new experiment which

was preferable not only to conservatism, but also to liberalism. Unlike the Social Democratic parties of the West, Russian socialism presented an imminent threat to the fundamentals of the Western economic and political system. Most of the Western Social Democratic parties were already tamed and were, in fact, absorbed into parliamentary democratic systems. They lacked the strength to destroy the capitalist economic order, had, in fact, no intentions of doing so, and were unwilling to abandon the parliamentary democratic political tradition. Russian socialism, however, threatened to abolish both. Fear of the Russian revolutionary tide put the Western Powers on the defensive and containment of Bolshevism became their prime preoccupation. Liberalization of Central and East Central Europe became secondary to the establishment of a buffer zone made up of strong, viable, and anticommunist states. Hence, governments or competing political factions in East Central Europe were increasingly judged less according to their commitments to democratic principles and more by their willingness to participate in an anti-Bolshevik crusade. The neighbors of Hungary took full advantage of this. By exaggerating the danger presented by the Hungarian left, they were able to expand at the expense of the Hungarian state. Hungarian counterrevolutionaries also played upon those fears and with their proven record of anticommunism they became more acceptable and safer to the West than either the radical or the liberal democratic left.

Yet, successful exploitation of Western fears did not in itself assure either the victory or the long-range survival of the regime. The counterrevolutionary movement triumphed and the new regime survived amidst a broadly based shift to the right in most states of the region. That shift was a general phenomenon which cannot be wholly attributed to fears of Bolshevism. The new state structure which emerged after the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was equally or perhaps more responsible. Bethlen may have been correct when he placed the partition of Hungary on the top of his list of cataclysmic events. War brought the country to the point of economic ruin, and massive loss of human life, combined with the prolonged suffering among civilians, left the population exhausted. But economic and psychological recovery would have been more rapid within the prewar territorial framework.

The new territorial arrangement, however, brought revolutionary changes for East Central Europe and the prewar path could no longer be traversed. Before the war the influence of international developments upon domestic politics was limited. The character of the system as well as the major political issues were defined largely by the long-range historical and more recent economic and social developments. That

relative immunity of domestic politics to international affairs ended with World War I and subsequent territorial changes. International developments assumed that dominant position in the shaping of internal politics once occupied by domestic issues. The new state structure altered economic realities, cut lines of communications, separated raw materials from industries, broke up a large free market area, erected economic, political, cultural, and military barriers, increased the isolation of each state, and created new priorities and perspectives. The breakup of the monarchy and the partition of Hungary led to the establishment of a group of insecure and antagonistic small states which necessarily increased the importance of such issues as military security and national unity and, conversely, stifled internal debate and reduced the political importance of domestic and social problems. These new priorities in every East Central European state aided the resurgence of the right.

If we recognize the radical character of these changes we gain a new perspective on the failures and successes of the three postwar Hungarian regimes: the democratic government of Mihály Károlyi, the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and the counterrevolutionary government of Admiral Miklós Horthy. The failure of the democratic revolution of October 1918 and the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic were directly related to the partition of the country. The two major issues in the political life of the prewar monarchy were reform of the state's nationality policies and economic and political democratization of society. The defeat of the old empire opened the door to a solution to both problems by sufficiently weakening the traditional conservative opponents of wide-ranging reforms. Károlyi's program enjoyed an initial broad support precisely because it was designed to cure the country's domestic ills by tackling both major issues simultaneously. Democratization of society was to be the key to both problems, which, it was believed, would have led to social, economic, and land reforms as well as to a satisfactory solution to the problems of the national minorities. We cannot but sympathize with Károlyi and admire the wisdom and moderation of his program. But we are also forced to admit that, with the disappearance of the prewar polity, his program designed to reform it, ceased to be opportune or even relevant.

The steady encroachment of the Successor States upon Hungary's territory made a peaceful reconciliation between the former nationalities of the monarchy an illusion; it pushed domestic issues into the background, created a national crisis in Hungary, helped to eclipse Károlyi, and opened the way for the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet state. The four-month tenure of the Hungarian Soviet Republic

was a last desperate attempt to force through a radical restructuring of society and, at the same time, to deal with the national crisis by a forceful opposition to the country's partitioning. It is important to note that no popular demand for radical reforms led to the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but broadly based disillusionment with a pro-Western orientation of the new democratic state and a perception that the national crisis provoked by the appetites of the Successor States could best be cured by a radical government willing to stand up to the Western Powers and their East Central European allies.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic was quickly defeated, but the sense of national crisis remained which aided the counterrevolutionary cause. Deep-rooted popular support for the policies of the counterrevolutionary government was lacking; yet, the incorporation by the Successor States of nearly three-fourths of the Hungarian kingdom's ancient territories and appendages and three-fifths of its former population, including millions of ethnic Hungarians, created a permanent national grievance that touched every Hungarian. By capitalizing on this issue the counterrevolutionary regime gained a degree of popular support and legitimacy. In the name of national unity it was able to silence demands of significant economic and social reforms. Indeed, the staying power of the regime was in no small part due to its successful mobilization of the emotional energies of the nation behind this genuine grievance. Moreover, the regime could rely on the unconditional support of a sizable army of refugees. From that group and from the other radicalized elements of the middle and upper classes the regime wove an interlocking network of political and social, public and secret, military and civilian associations, which, throughout the interwar period, dominated the political life of the country and assured the survival of the radical right.

Among the refugees the counterrevolutionary movement found a group of righteous, radicalized men, willing to serve as its shock troops. The refugees, especially those from Transylvania, played a prominent and often decisive role in virtually every counterrevolutionary political and military group during 1919 and 1920. They were strongly represented in counterrevolutionary groups organized in Vienna and Szeged, in Admiral Horthy's army and in its officers' detachments that were most responsible for the White Terror, and in the counterrevolutionary governments and National Assemblies of the 1919-22 period. With the victory of the right the refugees became a major political factor in Hungary's political life. Through their firm commitment to the cause of the political right a majority of the refugees were able to gain compensation for their losses and secured positions within Hungary that were

similar though not identical to the posts they had left behind in their places of birth now incorporated into the Successor States.

Assimilation of the refugees, however, proved very costly to Hungary. Refugees displaced thousands of liberal officials and educators. To make room for their children the higher educational system was expanded beyond the needs of the country; which added only to the already large stratum of permanently unemployed or underemployed intelligentsia. The size of the state bureaucracy was also greatly increased, posing a crushing burden to taxpayers. Finally, the refugees exerted a powerful influence on foreign policy. Their insistence upon the restoration of lost territories was one of the causes which helped to prevent a reconciliation with the Successor States.