

**Peasants into Communists: Politics, Identity and Social
Tensions during the Land Distribution of 1945 in Hungary**

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Abstract

This study attempts to elucidate how political parties organized their basis and local organizations in the countryside in 1945; I depict the discursive panels the party propagandas offered, the methods of agitation and the incentives provided to citizens as well the coercive practices the authorities may implemented to exclude others from political participation.

However, the focus will be on the local understanding of “popular democracy:” how villagers interpreted the new normative systems, and how individuals or groups tried to manipulate the rules and higher officials by bringing into play consequential strategies on their own in policy-making.

Alluding to the connections between the emergence of the new political regime, the land distribution process, and the restratification of village communities, this paper shall present a crucial phase of the transformation of the Hungarian rural society in a new perspective. The small-scale analysis will provide the possibility of restoring individual agency to the historical account about this period on the one hand, and revealing the variety of “peasant experiences” – which formed the personal and collective strategies and forms of accommodation to the new system – on the other.

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Introduction

During the spring of 1946, the Hungarian countryside was a site of tense political demonstrations. In Nyíregyháza, the capital of the easternmost county, approximately twenty-five thousand people crowded on the main square of the town demanding the resignation of the “reactionaries” from the county council. While the speakers handed the list of officials to be removed, the masses bawled: “Down with the reactionaries!, Clean out the county council!, We do not give back land!” The protests spread to dozens of villages and towns across the region, while the political tension was aggravated.¹ In mid-March, a delegation of two hundred peasants was sent to the capital in order to meet with the members of the government, and give voice to the people's grievances: to secure the achievements of the Land Reform Act adopted a year before, and to reinforce the local authorities of the so-called “popular democracy” over the state administration purportedly run by the prewar elite.²

Read one way, this was a clear manifestation of class politics: the less-well off strata of the rural society campaigned for self-governance and a more egalitarian distribution of landed property. Read from another angle however, the series of rallies served as means for the Communist Party to impose its infrastructural power and domination over the rural communities, and to force the political adversaries out from the administration. For the events discussed above were anything but the spontaneous eruptions of the people's will: local communist cadres meticulously organized the agitation and mass-mobilization of the party's adherence. It seems paradoxical that a political movement based on the ideology of collective

¹ *Magyar Nép*, March 12. 1946

² *Szabolcs-Szatmár megye a népi demokratikus forradalom kibontakozásának időszakában 1944-1948.* [Szabolcs-Szatmár County During the Period of the Unfolding of Popular Democratic Revolution] eds., Botár József. (Nyíregyháza, MSZMP Szabolcs-Szatmár megyei VB), 1985, 230. [Szabolcs-Szatmár County During the Period of the Unfolding of Popular Democratic Revolution]

agricultural production attempted to defend the private ownership of the peasantry. However, this kind of populist propaganda – that emphasized the reparations of social inequalities and the accountability of representatives of the previous regime – formed an integral part of the Stalinist political agenda.

Whether it was a set of improvised actions or a full-fledged political strategy, Soviet rural policy became a pretext for every Communist party of Eastern and Central Europe during the immediate postwar period, since the new political establishments in the satellite states faced similar problems as Bolsheviks during the late 1920s: as political movements of organized workers and Marxist intellectuals, they came into power – or at least sought to grasp it – in countries where the vast majority of the adult population was employed in the agricultural sector. Coming from an utterly different cultural background, Communist elites lacked both the adequate knowledge about the conditions of rural society and the appropriate social basis to convey their messages and political will. Thus, they strove for the reification of a political language that made this relatively unknown world “legible” – that is, it rendered the variety of social entities under mutually exclusive categories – on the one hand, and evoked the collective action of certain social groups on the other. It was an attempt to hegemonize various peasant identities ordering them into a strong programmatic direction: the class struggle. And this aim posited the distribution of land at the center of the discursive field.

This paper will attempt to elucidate how political parties organized their basis and local organizations in the countryside in 1945. I will depict the discursive panels the party propaganda offered, the methods of agitation and the incentives provided to citizens as well the discursive practices the authorities implemented to exclude others from political participation. However, the focus will be on the local understanding of “popular democracy:” how villagers interpreted the new normative systems, and how individuals or groups tried to

manipulate the rules and higher officials by bringing into play consequential strategies on their own in policy-making. I will also clarify the supposed social and cultural characteristics of those who joined the parties becoming the new upper stratum of the community, and examine the rupture and continuity between the former and the new local elites.

I will also attempt to demonstrate that the adherence to newly established political parties (and especially to the Communist Party) served as a means of social ascension. Although the local functionaries often presented themselves coming from the most deprived part of rural society, I will stress that they (or their families) had already been on the move on the social escalator. It is unquestionable that the set of arable land, the *property regime*, made boundaries between the local elites and the rest of the village during the inter-war period. Yet, the future party cadres had no lack of capital as such. On the contrary: they had possessed immaterial forms (cultural or social) of it occupying important positions in alternative social networks and organizations.

The paper will focus on a micro-region of Hungary, the so-called Rétköz, which is situated in the eastern borderlands of the country and formed a rather homogenous territory in economic, social or even ethnographical terms in the 1930s. Therefore, the comparative analysis of local policies in four different villages will enable me to demonstrate the successful as well as the failed strategies of the new establishment exercising power. In order to depict the tendencies and main motives of political participation, the research will implement both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The theoretical framework chapter will present the controversial interpretation of the land reform in Hungarian historiography, as well the evaluations of the political system of the “popular democracy.” I shall claim that until recently, most historical works on this field rather intended to justify the reasoning of one or the other side of the political arena, instead

of analyzing the production of political truth. The critique of the master narrative about the immediate postwar period implies the reconsideration of heuristic concepts, which aimed to reveal the dynamics of social development in the unfolding of Communism. The terms like “social atomization” or “interrupted embourgeoisement” purports the passivity of masses. I however will endorse the paradigm of active participation. However, the rejection of the totalitarian model does not imply the unconditional adoption of revisionist assumptions, nevertheless, my working hypothesis is strongly influenced by scholars from that side of the historiographical fence. Their findings – that the making of Stalinism cannot be construed from a “top-bottom” perspective, and that the adherence to the single-party was due to many participants considering it as a means of upward mobility – prove to be helpful for the issues that emerge. However, as the transition towards totalitarian rule had different dynamics in the Soviet Union and in the satellite states, those accounts that posit the problem in the context of Central European social and political development (such as Jan T. Gross) are more relevant.

The second chapter will elucidate the social and cultural background of the Communist Party's adherence. An analysis of the 1945 election results, the degree of popular adherence to political parties and the scale of church attendance will point out the statistical correlation between the popularity of the Communist Party and the influence of the Baptist religious movement in the given communities. I shall argue that people who had belonged to less well-off peasant families and had participated in non-conformist religious movements (such as Baptism or Adventism) became more likely members or even local leaders of the Communist Party after 1945. Utilizing their former acquaintances of religious affairs, they were able to provide firm support to the Party in certain towns becoming an indispensable link between locality and power. It is not the case that communist sympathizers had distanced themselves from Christianity, or turned into atheist for the sake of land ownership; instead, I will

suggest that for them, both religious and political ideology served (very often at the same time) as conceptual frameworks for creating a narrative about their upward mobility.

The third chapter provides a description of the everyday practices in policy-making on the local level. The prosopographical analysis of the decision makers' life courses and the reconstruction of social networks will elucidate the sociological background of communal conflicts. Evaluating the manipulative tactics and long-term strategies carried out by the villagers, I will refer to the works of the Italian school of *Microstoria*. To reconstruct the "lived experiences" of the peasantry, I shall also implement the methods of historical anthropology concerning textual analysis. Since members of local authorities and the vast majority of the claimants had not taken part in public discourse, and had not been co-opted in bureaucratic decision-making procedures previously, petitions and resolutions were seldom written in the correct legal nomenclature. Therefore, the detailed examination of the documents produced by the local institutions of the new "popular democratic" system would reveal the symbolic structure of the local (political) discourse that reflected the different social perceptions of the villagers.

In the conclusion I will argue that the division of local communities cannot be depicted correctly as the result of class tensions. Following the logic of the process, the land distribution was a genuine example of direct democracy, nevertheless, it represented a rearrangement of limited goods – not just soil, but authority and respect. According to my findings, the procedure served as the redistribution of economic capital in the first place, and as also as the original accumulation of political capital in the second place: the distributors, the veritable power brokers, secured their political legitimacy and influence through allocating the land in a manner the community could respect. The discursive practices of

accepting and dismissing claimants highlight the transformation of social space and power relations in local communities.

Chapter 1: Sovietization and Agrarian Reform: a

Historiographical Overview

This chapter concentrates on theoretical issues of the Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe in general, and on the transformation of rural society in Hungary. It also presents various interpretations of the “coalition years” (the immediate postwar period marked by the governance of an anti-fascist alliance) in the Hungarian historiography, as well the evaluations of the political system of the “popular democracy,” and of the land reform itself. I shall claim that until recently, most historical works on this field rather intended to justify the reasoning of one or the other side of the political arena, instead of analyzing the production of political truth. In doing so, most scholars tended to accept Marxist explanatory frameworks. I shall also claim that the political struggles and social tensions of this period cannot be presented correctly from this angle, and that the key concepts and models adopted by most scholars of the field are not categories of analysis, but rather the products of a political-intellectual discourse rooted in the inter-war period. To exceed the obsolete accounts on this topic, I will endorse to a different approach, which favors the restoration of agency of rural communities and individual actors instead of deriving their political attitudes and behaviors from a purported class situation.

Discussing the political changes in Central Europe during the immediate postwar period, the year 1945 emerges as a “zero point” in the master narrative of Sovietization, which

emphasizes rupture and discontinuity in the region's history. In the case of Hungary, the political field as well as the social structure radically altered after the intrusion of the Red Army. These alterations occurred primarily due to the double reform, which entailed the implementation of universal suffrage, the exclusion of large groups of the inter-war establishment from political participation. These measures conformed to the aims of retribution on the one hand, and the distribution of the grand-estates as well the nationalization of the industrial capacity in the name of social justice on the other. According to this argument, the “coalition years” (1945-1947/48) formed a brief interlude between the era of the authoritarian (and, after the German occupation of the country, deliberately pro-Nazi) interwar regime and the Stalinist dictatorship.

However, the nature, definition and implementation of “popular democracy” is a topic that has sparked controversies in Hungarian historiography over the last two decades. For those who use the personal recollections of leading progressive intellectuals such as István Bibó’s as springboard of their analysis, the coalition years is entailed the opportunity of democratic resumption. According to this reasoning, whilst the country’s sovereignty suffered some limitations due to the presence of the Red Army, the democratic and constitutional institutions had been established and basic human rights had been guaranteed. From the beginning of the new millenium however, the master narrative was reshaped to highlight the supposed ulterior motives and well hidden strategy of the Communists in seizing power. For some notables, even the expression of “popular democracy” is unacceptable, since it does not reflect the power struggle of the Communists, who acted as a genuine totalitarian movement from the end of World War II.³ Others – like Peter Kenéz – argues that the dynamics of the

³ Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, (Budapest: Corvina – Osiris), 2000, 220-221.

political transformation could be only deciphered if we look at the political developments in the context of the origin of the Cold War.⁴

In a sense, we are witnessing the reproduction of the totalitarian-revisionist debate, as the main dilemmas appear to be whether “popular democracy” was irreparably a preliminary stage of Stalinism, and whether the system in question was imposed on the Hungarian society, or it disposed reserves of legitimacy. Some recent case studies however, shed light to certain characteristics of the everyday practice of the making of “popular democracy.” Regarding the methods of corporate governance in state-owned enterprises, an article argues that the coalition years’ personnel policy did not differ from the practice of the 1950s or during World War II, since the political establishment kept direct control over the heavy industry, and corporate human resources policies were exposed to non-professional considerations. Although no party organizations were established in workplaces, even middle managers were usually members of one of the coalition parties, and political preferences had decisive role in shaping of career routes. The conclusion of these studies is that “popular democracy” – at least in the state-run economy – should be imagined as the overture for full-fledged totalitarianism, since the state power intrude into the everyday life of the citizens to a rather similar extent; and therefore, the coalition years should be coined as “multi-party totalitarianism.”⁵

Although the theory of “multi-party totalitarianism” is workable, since it highlights the two, paradoxically intertwined features of coalition years, the existence of some degree of political pluralism on the one hand, and the process of Communist “gleichaltung” on the

⁴ See: Peter Kenez, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2006. 2-3.

⁵ Bódy Zsombor: “Többpárti totalitarizmus? Politika és személyzeti politika néhány magyar nagyvállalatnál 1945 és 1948 között.” [Multi-Party Totalitarianism? Politics and Human Resources Policies in some Hungarian Coporation between 1945 and 1948] In: Sándor Horváth ed., *Mindennapok Rákosi és Kádár korában. Új utak a szocialista korszak kutatásában*. Bp., Nyitott Könyvműhely, 116-131. [Multi-Party Totalitarianism? Politics and Human Resources Policies in some Hungarian Coporation between 1945 and 1948]

other. However, the term could be misleading in two respects. For one, totalitarianism as a heuristic model of authoritative society-engineering attempts of the twentieth century, cannot be applicable to a political setting, where multiple organizations – who are competing for popular support and exercise power together at the same time – plays the role of a totalitarian movement. Totalitarianism – according to the classics of the field – is a monodrama, at last on the side of state power. Second, “multi-party totalitarianism” attributes systemic features to the coalition years. However, even the period between 1944/45 and 1949 can be spaded into shorter phases in terms of the development of constitutional frameworks, political agendas and socio-economical structural changes. In regarding of these objections, philosopher J. L. Talmon’s concept on the nature of “totalitarian democracy” proves to be more helpful in understanding the political culture of the coalition years. Talmon introduced this term to depict a distinct intellectual stream of democratic thinking that arose from the experiences of the French Revolution. According to him, the totalitarian interpretation of democratic rule differs from the liberal one, in the sense of its chiliastic, though laicized expectations, which are articulated in a firm belief of the natural, harmonic order of society. While both schools of democracy require the participation of citizens in public affairs, from the view of totalitarian democracy, it became the sole authentic form of human existence. The belief in harmonic forms of social life entails the demand that political leadership should improve human conditions and compensate or even abolish the inequalities between the citizens. Therefore state authority is entitled to interfere in private affairs in order to create egalitarian systems of distribution of goods. Partisans of totalitarian democracy had ambivalent views on private property. According to Talmon, the existence of private ownership is not refuted entirely in this paradigm, however, the right of the individual for

possession is not derived from formal norms, but should be established by the deliberative consent of the community.⁶

The concept of totalitarian democracy seems to be apt in analyzing the ideological background of the coalition governments. If we construe “popular democracy” primarily not as a political system, but as a discursive practice, we will find that the principles of totalitarian democracy were in the core of the official rhetoric. The most important feature is the relentless demand for justice. Like any postwar government in East and Central Europe, the Hungarian coalition was a regime of transitional justice. The so-called people’s courts were set deliberately for political reasons, as the trials serves as educational moments, when the public was able to perceive the rupture of political continuity with the former pro-Nazi regime; the perpetrators were convicted, while the “Hungarian people” was absolved.⁷ However, other institutions were established for retroactive jurisdiction: the so-called local National Committees screened the state employees, local officials, even ordinary people requesting for state assistance. Nevertheless, the “popular democracy” was also aimed to ameliorate social justice by the enforced redistribution of goods as material forms of reparations to the people for their wartime sacrifices and losses. However, in the political discourse, the two forms of justice had been conflated, and in practice – as Istvan Pogany argues – “the inferences with property rights were often became an integral part of general policy of persecution or discrimination.”⁸ Although this policy had been manifested during the war, crosshairs got shifted to different social groups under “popular democracy”.

⁶ J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. (New York: Praeger, 1965), 1-13.

⁷ László Karsai, “People’ Courts and Revolutionary Justice in Hungary 1945-1946,” in: *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Aftermath*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 233-251.

⁸ Istvan Pogany, *Righting Wrongs in Eastern Europe*, (Manchester – New York, Manchester University Press), 1997.17.

As for rural society, the standard analysis from the beginning of the 1990s construed the agricultural reform of 1945 as the only positive political undertaking of this era. Adopting an emancipatory framework, most scholars claimed that the dissolution of grand estates increased social justice within rural communities, since during the interwar period Hungary had the most unfair land distribution anywhere in Eastern and Central Europe. Recent works has a more nuanced, though not less contradictory approach to the problem: they assert that a moderate agenda – hinged on small-scale agriculture – could have given way to an “organic development” of peasant communities; however, this process was hijacked by the Communist Party. At first, communists introduced a “social revolution” by pushing through a radical version of land reform, and by encouraging spontaneous land grabs that ultimately aggravated class tensions. After the take-over, the party-state systematically liquidated all voluntary associations by coercive power, and attempted to eliminate traditional forms of peasant life-style, depriving smallholders from their landed property during the collectivization campaign. As the private domain was sequestered by the state, and the access for goods depended on one's connections to the bureaucracy, the imposition of the regime's infrastructural power – the “occupation of the village” – reformulated the status hierarchies within the rural communities, and, in the long-run, led to social atomization.⁹ Although the latter approach echoes the thesis of the totalitarian school, it follows the argumentation of the former analysis: it does not question the standard periodization, and it maintains the traditional – class-based – explanation of social conflicts within the rural society.

One of the reasons why contemporary scholars are seemingly reluctant to deal with the history of the land reform, is the unshakeable authority of the standard interpretation by Ferenc Donáth. Close colleague (and after 1956, co-defendant) of Imre Nagy in the Agrarian Ministry, he left his fingerprints on the 1945 land reform bill. His first major work was

⁹ See: Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*. 364.

published more than forty years ago on the topic. He argues – with distinguished erudition and insight – transformation of agrarian sector in 1945 was reform and a social revolution at the same token. In his narrative, the social tensions between the various strata of rural society led to the collapse of the property regime based on grand-estates. However, he admits that the government fearing that the conflicts could not have been mitigated anymore, took over those grass-root initiatives by implementing the land reform bill.¹⁰ Though it is Donáth himself, who offers the opportunity to construe the land distribution process in the context of Sovietization, since the political campaigns for the land reform could have served as means for raising party adherence. However, Donáth discusses the events in light of the agrarian development in Hungary, and as – according to a widely shared historical view – the history of peasantry was framed by the constant struggle for property, the land reform is interpreted as an endpoint of a centuries-long class-war.¹¹

It seems this point that respective narrative of the land reform and the evolvement of totalitarian practice in everyday life could not be presented in the same theoretical framework, since the former emphasizes the activity and willingness of the rural masses, while the latter highlights the pressure of state domination. However, Polish-American historian Jan T. Gross attempted to challenge the customary interpretation of Soviet totalitarianism. Shifting the focus from the narrowly defined political domain to the social sphere, he argued that 1945 was barely a watershed in the everyday experiences of executing state power, especially in two respects. First, in terms of the etatization of private economy: state control over the agricultural sector through coercion (such as through labor obligations and compulsory produce deliveries) had already been implemented during the wartime era. Furthermore, the legal frameworks and institutionalized practices that provided exceptional

¹⁰ Ferenc Donáth, *Demokratikus földreform Magyarországon 1945-1947*, [Democratic Land Reform in Hungary] (Budapest: Akadémiai), 1969, 27-29.

¹¹ See: Ferenc Donáth, *Reform and Revolution: Transformation of Hungary's Agriculture 1945-1970*, (Budapest: Corvina), 1980.

means for state intervention remained astoundingly intact despite the rhetorics of “social revolution” and “popular democracy”. Second, in terms of the property regime: widespread expropriations and takeovers of Jewish property had already created enormous impact on the local inhabitants’ social perception. Such actions demonstrated that the existential circumstances of individuals entirely depended on the goodwill of state power. I shall claim that these lived experiences (along with the trauma of war) molded the individual and collective dispositions to the new regime’s social control mechanisms.¹²

Analyzing the emergence of Soviet power in the former eastern territories of Poland after its 1939 occupation, Gross also implies that the making of the Soviet type of totalitarian regime was rather a common enterprise of the communist ruling class and certain groups of the rural communities, not a one-sided imposition of a coercive system. Paradoxically, while the postwar elite strove to destroy the former authority structures, the Party was vested in various previously existing social networks, and – in many cases – families that held considerable influence over communities. Far from the ideal-type of an atomized society, these networks franchised the party-state: the privatization of state authority – he argues – is the key phenomenon that explains the diverse and ambiguous responses to the government-implemented reforms. Although – Gross concludes – class warfare was a construction of official propaganda, tensions and conflicts were not: villagers tried to settle their private disputes by putting them into different, political or ideological context.¹³

Gross’ findings may help to theorize an approach that presents the transformation of rural communities in the context of Sovietization, and the link that connects the state politics with the life-worlds of peasants is the problem of accessing and exercising power. This perspective

¹² Jan T. Gross, “Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration”, in: *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Aftermath*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 15-36.

¹³ Jan T. Gross, “A Note on the Nature of Soviet Totalitarianism,” in: *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 34. No. 3. (Jul., 1982) 367-376.

also supposes that in the unfolding of the new regime, agency did not exclusively pertain to the state, but to the masses as well. Framing the transformation of the village in a perspective “from below”, this approach provides the opportunity to focus on the discursive field in which the diversity of the perceptions about communal life, local politics and social stratification were articulated.

Chapter 2: The Political Semantics of 1945: The Use and Abuse of Asymmetrical Counter-Concepts

The National Assembly elections of November 4, 1945 have been recorded in the collective memory as the first genuinely free voting process in the course of Hungarian history. For the first time, universal suffrage was guaranteed for each and every citizen without any restrictions in terms of sex and educational qualifications. Unlike the prewar practice, voters of rural communities were able to cast a secret ballot without being forced to reveal their political affiliations in front of the electoral commission formed by local authorities. It is however less emphasized in the contemporary historiography that the 1945 elections were based on “limited competition” of political adversaries. Following the indications of the Allied Control Committee, with one insignificant exception, the provisional authorities denied the permission to participate in the elections from any political movement that was not a member of the Hungarian National Liberation Front, the umbrella-organization of those anti-fascist forces, which forces that formed the Provisional National Government in December, 1944.¹⁴ Although the exclusion of predominantly right-wing formations distorted the political field, the multi-party system subsisted: as the Communist initiative of forming a unified list had been rejected, and the public witnessed a veritable political struggle.

The run-up for the elections was, nevertheless, a crucial contest of different party-building strategies. In rural communities, the political forces experienced a lack of organizational background, since the Horthy-era's natural party of government, the

¹⁴ This exemption was Géza Teleky's Hungarian Radical Party, however, it remained extra-parliamentary force after the elections. See: Sándor Balogh, *Parlamenti és Pártharcok Magyarországon, 1945-1947*, [Parliamentary and Party Struggle in Hungary, 1945-1947] (Budapest: Kossuth), 1975, 65.

conservative-traditionalist Party of National Unity, obstructed the evolution of any alternative political undertakings among progressive political agendas in the countryside. Out of the four main forces, only the Smallholder's Party (FKgP) performed well during the elections in the 1930s in rural constituencies, but its support evaporated due to the persecutions by local authorities and the emergence of the radical right-wing. The Social Democratic Party (SDP), the oldest party still in existence, was restricted to augment its base in villages according to a 1921 agreement with the conservatives. The National Peasant Party (NPP) was created anew, though it was rooted in the intellectual movement of sociographers and the so-called “popular writers” of the inter-war period. Being the only political force, which forces that could rely on the inexhaustible supplies of the Red Army, the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) was in an advantageous position in terms of organizing their base. However, the movement had a bad reputation among villagers due to the effectiveness of the political language of the previous regime on the one hand, and to the unsatisfactory experiences with the short-lived Soviet Republic of 1919 on the other.¹⁵

This time the Communist Party carefully adjusted its initiative of “social revolution” to the tactics of maximizing votes. Instead of arguing in favor of immediate transformation into a communist society based on a collectivized economy, leading Party intellectual József Révai argued in favor of the establishment of a so-called “popular democracy.” In this understanding, “popular democracy” was supposed to be a pluralist but Soviet-influenced political system that was based on firmly egalitarian and emancipatory principles. At the core of the agenda was the demand for a double reform, which entailed the implementation of universal suffrage and exclusion of large groups of the inter-war establishment from political participation conforming to the aims of retribution on the one hand, and the distribution of the

¹⁵ See: Julien Pap, *La Hongrie libérée: état, pouvoirs et société après la défaite du nazisme: septembre 1944-septembre 1947*, [Hungary Liberated: State, Power and Society After the Defeat of Nazism: September 1944- September 1947] (Rennes: Press Universitaire de Rennes), 2006, 34-41.

grand-estates as well the nationalization of the industrial capacity in the name of social justice on the other. Révai made significant concessions at the expense of ideology excepting the maintenance of private ownership in the agrarian sector; nonetheless, he remained firmly committed to the abolition of grand estates.¹⁶

Hungary prior World War II was a nation of great inequalities. In the countryside there were, on the one extreme, estates of thousands of holds in the hands of a few members of the aristocracy; on the other hand, there was a mass of three million agricultural proletarians, comprising one third of the country's total population, who had little or no land. In between, there was a relatively small number, about a fifth of the total agricultural workforce, who could call themselves self-supporting peasants.¹⁷ As the land ownership and modes of consumption were strongly correlated in rural society, economic classes and status groups were more or less overlapping during the interwar period: landowners, wealthy peasants and some professionals (local state bureaucrats, teachers, doctors and clerks) formed the upper strata, the elite of the communities. Although honor was strongly attached to the size of the estate, the landowner's lifestyle, genealogy and education were also important factors in terms of the stratification of rural society. This could cause status inconsistencies: families of petty noble ancestry usually had more esteem, even if their economic situation did not differ from that of a middle-peasants'. As for the professionals, they usually lacked considerable property, however, their cultural capital provided them with a "similar degree" of respect compared to the wealthy members of the community.

That land reform must be introduced after the war was not a debated issue; however, the debate over practical details led to an intense struggle among the political parties: while

¹⁶ Révai József, *A magyar mezőgazdaság és a parasztság fejlődése*, . [The Development of Hungarian Agriculture and Peasantry] in: *Történelem és társadalom kutatás* (Budapest: Akadémiai) 1984, 251-253.

¹⁷ Rudolf, Andorka, "Social Problems and Social Changes in Hungary Since the 1930s: Economic, Social and Political Causes of the Demise of State Socialism," in *The Transition from State Socialism in Eastern Europe: The Case of Hungary*. Adam B. Seligman, Craig Calhoun (eds.). London: Jai Press, 57.

the Smallholder's Party (FKgP) was in favor of a reform carried out gradually, the Communist Party (MKP), along with the National Peasants Party (NPP), aimed to push through the changes immediately. Under Communist direction and with the aid of the Red Army, spontaneous land grabs were executed by the villagers. These acts were presented as signs of a social revolution, however, the party regarded these acts a mobilizing device. As a result of the reform, 75,000 estates and 5.6 million holds were expropriated or confiscated, which represented 35% of the country's territory. At the end of 1945, every third peasant was a beneficiary of the reform, the percentage of landless peasants dropped from 46.8 % to 17%.¹⁸

By positing the question of land reform at the center of public discussions on social justice, the Communists managed to remove the initiative from the agrarian parties in the question of transforming the countryside, since each party of the coalition accepted - at least in public – the emancipatory frameworks of the land reform. Thus, one of the distinctive features of the political arena during the immediate postwar period was that the rivals, who were supposed to represent various political alternatives, ideologies and value-systems, actually worked closely together in a unity government outlining very similar, if not identical, agendas. Candidates, party officials, and leading columnists of party-run newspapers emphasized the differences between the election programs less; rather, they argued that their group had carried out the “objectives of popular democracy” more congruently, more faithfully. Posters and leaflets distributed in the countryside highlighted the performance and successes of the provisional government, claiming that these developments would not have been reached, and would not been preserved, without the strong support and parliamentary presence of the given political force.

¹⁸ Iván T. Berend – György Ránki, *The Hungarian Economy in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: St. Martin's), 1985. 183.

However, the political competition over the year of 1945 was two-fold in nature: the coalition parties argued in favor of a complete change of elites upon the common interest in discrediting the prewar political leadership (on national and local level respectively) emphasizing their lack of competence in administering the country, while they strove to expand their social influence at the expense of each others as well. From the winter of 1944 to the summer of 1945, the former challenge was more imminent. The consequences of wartime catastrophe proved to be more than symbolic indications about the collapse of the authority of the Hungarian state; yet, even Soviet military control did not shake the authority and respect of the local establishment of state officials, landowners and the local intelligentsia (local clerics and state employees); many communities supposedly still construed them as the legitimate negotiators with the representatives of the foreign power.¹⁹

As for the coalition – or as we shall see, the Communist Party for that matter – it was vital to replace them with their own cadres. The dissolution Nazi-collaborate organizations (including the former ruling party) excluding their former members from participating in public affairs proved to be the legal manifestation of this attempt. Nevertheless, the disqualification of the prewar local authorities emerged first on the level of public speeches, for it was inasmuch substantial to alter the modes of political debates by reifying a discursive field, where the former establishment were not entitled to utter. The transformation of the public sphere mirrored this effort: as the war destroyed private media enterprises, all editorial boards depended on the government and more precisely, the coalition parties. The newly published daily papers served as the official publication of the given political forces; moreover, the parties owned and ran film studios and movie distribution companies. The means of mass communication spread the message of the ruling coalition, and that was the program of “popular democracy.”

¹⁹ Pap, *La Hongrie*, 23-24

I have already discussed the ideological background of “popular democracy.” Here, I would like to depict how the concept was framed for rural society. As any political language of modernity, the anti-fascist discourse was based on the semantic operation that Reinhard Koselleck coined the “creation of asymmetric counter-concepts.” According to him, asymmetric counter-concepts serve as discursive tools in order to help political communities to demarcate themselves from other human groups, and to define otherness. Another characteristic of these pair of notions is that one’s own position is readily defined by criteria “which made it possible for the resulting counterposition only to be negated.”²⁰ Thus, leaders of the coalition identified themselves and the electorates with the “people” or, more accurately, the “working people” as opposed to the “reactionaries.” The “reactionary” – unlike the “war criminal” or “collaborator” – was not legally defined category, although it surely encompassed the latter ones; it proved to be a label that was used to point out, depict, and identify the “enemy within”— the domestic other, who attempts to undermine the democratic undertaking of the new regime in administering justice for the rural communities. The “reactionary” had several names in public and private discourses – “fascist,” “Nazi,” “Horthyst” – that attributed political activity to a person. However, the “reactionary” for many occasions, was not depicted according to its deeds, but according to its thinking and life-style. Thus, the term was easily utilized against the former upper-strata of the Hungarian countryside: landowners, public or private officials, merchants and intellectuals, who – having been in professions, which did not elicit physical effort – did not belong to the “working people.”

The postwar propaganda also bestowed master narratives and political myths in arguing that the former elite should be replaced; even the deprivation of basics civil rights from them would not have been an overreaction. One of the most successful examples was the legend of

²⁰ Reinhard Koselleck, *Future’s Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press) 1985, 114.

the “Flight of Gentlemen.” István Márkus, a young sociologist and activist of the NPP, published an article in August, 1945, in which he presented with eloquence and erudition how high-profile state officials, aristocrats and other notables fled from the Eastern Borderlands as the Second Ukrainian Front approached. He argued that the traditional landowners’ class of the Hungarian countryside abandoned the peasants facing the incoming of enemy troops, and they sided – even indirectly – the pro-Nazi Arrow Cross troupe in 1944. Therefore – Márkus concluded – the Horthy-era’s leadership not just lost the privilege in shaping the public life, but they had been equitably confronted to the radical change of the property regime that was exercised during land distribution.²¹

The “Flight” became a widely cited trope about the moral corruption and political ineffectiveness of the so-called “world of gentlemen” (*úrvilág*) of interwar Hungary. Although the Communists were the most adamant critics of the *ancien régime*, the Social Democrats and representatives of the NPP usually echoed their vitriolic language.²² As for the FKgP – according to the widely shared opinion – the party clearly benefited from the unwillingness of their partners to allow other right-wing groups to run in the elections. Representing the middle peasantry, the Smallholders had a more moderate standing on the issues of retroactive justice and land reform – yet, its leaders never questioned the coalition’s political agenda – the party counted on the support by more traditionalist elements of the society. In the short term, however, the cooperation with certain groups of the prewar establishment was rather perceived as political ballast for the party, since the Communists tenaciously attacked the FKgP.²³

²¹ István Márkus, “Az urak futása” in: *Az ismeretlen főszereplő*. (Budapest: Szépirodalmi), 1991.

²² See the article of NPP party secretary Imre Kovács. Imre Kovács, „A demokrácia útja Magyarországon,” [The Road of Democracy in Hungary] in. *Válasz*, 1946. Vol. 2. No. 2. 14-17

²³ As Rákosi put it on the forum of the Communist members of Land Distribution Committees : “The reactionary could lose its property, but never gives up the hope that he would get it back. [...] Now it sneaked into the Smallholders Party [...] We should never underestimate the capability of the reaction.” PIL 274/13.23
Rákosi Mátyás beszéde a Földosztó Bizottságok Kongresszusának Kommunista küldöttei előtt, 1945

As a consequence, while the arrangement of the discursive field of “popular democracy,” which built a fence between the “people” and the “reactionaries,” remained undisputed, the election contest seemingly broke the solidarity between the members of the anti-fascist front: on the level of local or regional politics, Communists, Social Democrats, and representatives of the National Peasant Party accused the FKgP (and sometimes each other as well) of having committed treason in serving the “cause of the working people,” of having provided a safe shelter for Nazi collaborators by delaying the condemnation of war criminals in front of the People’s Court, and of having given assistance to reactionary landlords in claiming back their landed property. Following the radicalization of political debates in the running-up of the elections, social theorist István Bibó – himself a cadre of the NPP – claimed that the newborn Hungarian democracy was in the state of crisis, as both the Communists as well their fellow travelers on the one hand, and the camp of the former establishment and upper-class on the other, based their respective behavior on unjustified fears: the fear from dictatorship and the fear from reactionary developments. According to Bibó, none of these assumptions were justified, but their very existence and influence could have undermined – he believed – the public trust in the culture of democratic policy-making and multi-party institutions.²⁴ The reactions of the electorates towards the discourse of “popular democracy” mirrored the growing tensions between the two sides – at least on the surface

szeptember 9. [Mátyás Rákosi’s Speech for Communist participants at the Congress of Land Distribution Committees’]

²⁴ István Bibó, “The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy,” in: István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-determination: Selected Writings*, trans. by András Boros-Kazai (Boulder, Co: Social Science Monographs) 1991, 89-91.

Chapter 3: The Making of “Popular Democracy”: Participation, Loyalty, and Voting Preferences in the 1945 Elections

This chapter aims to give an explanatory model for the distribution of voting preferences of rural constituencies in the 1945 general elections by a reduction of scale in analysis. First, I will argue that macro-scale interpretations of the election results are inapt to give full-fetched explanations about the voting preferences of rural milieus. Since local residents were less engaged in party politics or ideological debates, masses of peasants and agrarian workers voted according to their enthusiasm with the local representatives of the newly established regime. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall provide a case study that grounds my claim. By using the methodological frameworks of ethnographer Fredrick Barth as a springboard to my argument, I will shift my focus onto a marginal case. The election results of a single remote village on the Eastern Borderlands, or rather, the distinctive features that made this distribution of votes possible, will underline the adequacy of the “from below” perspective: having been the only community in Szabolcs county where the Communists managed to win the majority of votes, the case of Nagyvarsány will serve as a “normal exception” that views the dynamics of leftist political adherence from a genuine perspective.

2.2 The Macro-Scale Explanations of the Election Results

If the effectiveness of a political language can be measured by the size of public mobilization, as well as participation in campaign rallies and in the voting process, the discourse of “popular democracy” preformed extraordinarily well. The adherence of the coalition parties was overwhelming: by the autumn of 1945 – according to reliable estimates – between 40% and 50% percent of the adult population, or over 2,5 million people, had joined a political organization. The Communists had over 350,000 participants, the SDP managed to gain approximately fifty thousand more, and even the less institutionalized NPP had up to 170,000. The growth of the Smallholders Party outshone all of them with 900,000 supposed adherents.²⁵ While most parties from the coalition had been founded to represent specific social groups – as the Social Democratic Party was the political forum for organized workers, or the National Peasant Party focused on the less well-off peasant classes – the traditional boundaries of social orientation had been blurred during the campaign. The Communist Party registered an influx of new members from rural constituencies, while the Smallholders elicited support in commercial centers and industrial towns.²⁶ Moreover, the local organizations of the political quartet had been established in every single town of the country.

As its infrastructural power was expanded in the countryside, the Communist Party officials looked forward to the national assembly elections with optimism. On a Central Committee meeting in July, party secretary Mátyás Rákosi expressed their chances by

²⁵ Balogh, *Parlamenti*, 274. n65

²⁶ Lajos Mádai, *Az 1945-ös választási eredmények demográfiai összefüggései*, [Demographic Implications of the 1945 Election Results] (Budapest: KSH) 1992, 34.

winning Budapest by 70% of the votes.²⁷ Although the Party was second in agrarian areas in terms of adherence, as Ernő Gerő explained to his Soviet colleagues, the dynamics of mobilizing the rural base were promising: the Party sent the most members in the so-called National Committees, the local boards formed by the coalition parties in order to survey on the local authorities.²⁸ The Communist cadres were also overrepresented in local Land Distribution Committees – there were more than three thousand of them nationwide. Moreover, in many parts of the countryside, the local SDP or NPP organizations were led by covert communist party members. Nevertheless, the elections were held in the midst of land distribution process, which provided – according to the Politburo reasoning – the ground to depict the Party as the authentic representative of the more than 600,000 new holders.

The National Assembly elections, like the municipal elections of Budapest a month earlier in October, dissipated the Communists' anticipations: along with extremely high turnout (over 92%) the Party came in a poor third with less than 17% of the votes, while the FKgP won by landslide, gaining 57%. SDP had 17%, while the Peasant Party obtained less than 7%.²⁹ There are several explanations about the resounding outcome of this political contest. In the Communist propaganda (and later, the official historiography), the sudden misunderstandings between the Party and the masses were due to the still strong influence of the "reaction." The activity of the Catholic Church during the campaign was highlighted as the main reason why public opinion turned against the Left. As the most important landowner of the country, the high clergy strongly opposed the radical swing of land reform. Nevertheless, the spiritual leader of the Hungarian Church, Cardinal Mindszenty's views on the main questions about the constitutional architecture were thoroughly different from the

²⁷ PIL 274 1/28 KV July 7, 1945 Központi Vezetőség ülésének jegyzőkönyve [Central Committee meeting]

²⁸ *Moszkvának jelentjük... Titkos dokumentumok 1944-1948.* eds., Izsák Lajos, Kun Miklós. [We are reporting to Moscow... Secret Documents, 1944-1948] (Budapest: Századvég), 1994. 57.

²⁹ László Hubai, *Magyarország XX. századi választási atlasza 1920-2000*, II. köt, [Electoral Atlas of Hungary in the Twentieth Century 1920-2000] (Budapest: Napvilág), 2001, 56.

ideological frameworks of “popular democracy.” In his pastoral letter issued just before the elections, he argued that the believers should have refused the radical alternative offered by the MKP.³⁰ After the inauguration of the renewed, Smallholders-led coalition government, the churches and civic organization with religious background became the primary target of the “fight against the reaction.”³¹

Most scholars of the field argue, however, that the election result reflected less on political skirmishes than a fundamental choice between political alternatives. Current Hungarian historiography basically adopted the view of Ignác Romsics, who claims that the basic preferences of the electorate lay not just on the choice acceptance or refusal of “popular democracy”, but on the choices “between Western-style parliamentary democracy and socialism, or between mixed economy resting on private ownership and a planned economy.”³² Catching up the same thread of thought, Peter Kenez asserts that the Smallholders represented the civic (*polgári*) alternative to radical social change being the only political force standing above class interests, and standing for Hungary’s independence.³³

While this reading of the election results seems to be convincing if we attempt to decipher the causes of the electorate preferences’ deviation from the endpoint of the Sovietization process, it is very unlikely that Romsics’ interpretation would explain the electoral behavior of the rural masses, since his narrative *prima facie* purports conscious and well-informed voters, who made rational decisions based on utilitarian convictions, as well a free and competitive market of political ideas. None of these requirements were fulfilled. Prior World War II, up to 2,3 million people lived in the countryside without any property and

³⁰ PIL 274 7/ 262 1-3 Cardinal Mindszenty’s Pastoral

³¹ Kenez, *Hungary From the Nazis to the Soviets*, 166.

³² Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, 230.

³³ Kenez, *Hungary form the Nazis to the Soviets*, 98-99.

deprived from the right and room for political participation.³⁴ Although the less well-off strata of rural society were hardly in favor of collectivization (which, for the record, was not advertized by the MKP during the election campaign), since they were generally aspiring for private property and self-sufficiency, there is no indication to presume that these masses would have preferred a capitalist option. While the middle- and well-off peasants, who were supposed to have developed entrepreneurial skills, could have been more open towards a civic program.

It is conceivable however, that the political map of the coalition years was more sophisticated. As Charles Gati asserts, apart from the bourgeois-democratic and the collectivist-industrial paths, the voters discovered a third, populist-agrarian alternative characterized by a vaguely defined idea of agrarian socialism, with the emphasis on the importance of local markets and small-scale agricultural production.³⁵ This communitarian but not collectivist ideology was mainly represented by the Peasant Party, which performed well among less well-off peasants, especially in counties eastern of River Tisza. However, Gati admits that the electoral bases of the parties were supposedly less homogeneous than his model asserts, since – according to his assumptions – approximately one-third of Smallholders voters were actually populist oriented, and still they supported the FKgP. According to his argument, this pattern was possible because the election was not decided by the issue of development alone, since – as Kenez also emphasized – the electoral preferences were shaped by the question of sovereignty, namely, the degree of Soviet influence.³⁶

The democratically elected parliament (and the council of ministers appointed by the same body) aimed to be the keystone of the legislative and administrative superstructure; likewise, it was considered to serve as means to repair the legitimacy deficit of the country's

³⁴ Rudolf, Andorka, *Social Problems and Social Changes in Hungary*, 77.

³⁵ Charles Gati, *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc*, (Durham: Duke University Press) 1986, 68-69.

³⁶ Kenez, *Hungary between the Nazis and the Soviets*, 98.

radically altered ruling elite by conveying the message that the population willingly accepted the agenda of “popular democracy.” Prior to the fall of 1945, the anti-fascist coalition claimed to exercise its power in full accordance with the will of the people. However, it was palpable that the interim government – formed in the Soviet controlled Eastern regions of Hungary – would have hardly elicited the almost unquestionable obedience and cooperation of civilians if it had not been backed by the Red Army. Soviet military assistance was indispensable to the maintenance of law and order; yet, nothing was more alien the anti-fascist coalition's self-identification than to be perceived as comprador elite, and, as we have seen, the parties mobilized enormous intellectual and material resources in order to win the support of the masses, expanding their infrastructural power to every layer of society.³⁷ Nonetheless, the problem of Soviet presence was not interpreted solely through the filter of the discourse on national pride; the influx of such a foreign army shaped the individual and collective reasoning about future expectations as well.

The image of the “ruthless, uncivilized Bolshevik “other” – as spread by the official propaganda of the Horthy-era and affirmed by the emotional but factually dubious recollections from veterans of the Eastern Front – framed the horizon of expectations among the rural population years before the Second World War had even reached the countryside.³⁸ During the whole interwar period, the public was instructed that a Russian invasion would have brought an end of the world as they all knew it: it would destroy the traditional peasant life-style by introducing the cooperative; it would not tolerate any religious activities. As a consequence, the worry about the “Russians,” who might yet overrun Europe, grasped the collective imagination like the fear from epidemic or famine.³⁹ Thus, when the worst

³⁷ Ferenc Donáth assumes that the presence of Soviet troops was indispensable in convincing the peasants that the dissolution of grand estates was possible. See: Dontáh, *Földreform*, 1969, 34.

³⁸ About the cultural practice of othering, see: Iver Neumann, *The Uses of the Other*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 1999. 134-173.

³⁹ In that sense, the mentality of the peasantry in early modern times did not differ much from their twentieth

nightmares were beginning to be realized by the emergence of Soviet troops in eastern Hungary, or several months before, when the loss of war had been perceived even in remote village communities, villagers started adjusting themselves to changing circumstances.

Like the attitudes towards the invaders, various patterns of lived experiences about encounters with the foreign force were registered: wherever military resistance proved to be stubborn, civilians became the victims of lootings or physical atrocities (including the widespread rape of women); nevertheless, several thousands of men were deported to forced labor. In other areas however, especially in eastern Hungary where the Front broke through rapidly, the commissars helped re-organizing the communal life with the relative (and for most of the times, reluctant) consent of the inhabitants. Paradoxically, the course of events coined “Liberation” in the postwar historical discourse occurred in a form of coercive practices of men in foreign uniform. It was, nevertheless, a war traumatized population that cast in ballots in November, 1945, and it is at least arguable, that in many cases, despite all agitprop efforts to conceal the Party’s ideological vein, the Communists became victims of anti-Soviet sentiments based on personal and collective memories.

Apart from the reception of wartime traumas and the question of national independence, there are other contexts of electoral behavior worthy of examination: for one is class-identity. Hungary prior World War II was a nation of great inequalities. In the countryside there were, on the one extreme, estates of thousands of holds in the hands of a few members of the aristocracy; on the other hand, there was a mass of three million agricultural proletarians, comprising one third of the country’s total population, who had little or no land. In between, there was a relatively small number, about a fifth of the total agricultural workforce, who could call themselves self-supporting peasants. As the land

century counterparts. However, in the sixteenth century, the Turks played the role of the “other.” See: Arthur E. Imhof, *Lost Worlds: How Our European Ancestors Coped with Everyday Life and Why Life is so Hard Today*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia) 1996, 72.

ownership and modes of consumption were strongly correlated in rural society, economic classes and status groups were more or less overlapping during the interwar period: landowners, wealthy peasants and some professionals (local state bureaucrats, teachers, doctors and clerks) formed the upper strata, the elite of the communities.

Leftist, progressive intellectuals, many notables of the so-called populist sociographers' movement and even the Moscovite branch of the Hungarian Communist émigrés conceived the Hungarian countryside as the field of repressed social-tensions waiting to erupt.⁴⁰ The spontaneous land grabs in late 1944 and early 1945 – exercised without any manipulation by high politics – were interpreted as signals for the coalition government that the leadership should have introduced the land reform unless it would have been impossible to mitigate these social conflicts. Nevertheless, these popular actions enforced the populist sociographers' reading of rural society: that the milieus of well-off peasants (*nagygazdák*) and middle-peasants (*középparasztok*) detached from the life-worlds of smallholders (*kisgazdák, törpebirtokosok*), not to mention agrarian workers (*mezőgazdasági cseléd*).⁴¹ In theoretical works, political speeches and even in literary artifacts, the life-worlds of the villagers, their conducts, views and desires were depicted according to these categories, which were inasmuch invented than as found. And as land distribution was in the core of rural underclass demands and expectations, the political forces representing the agrarian populist alternatives (and in that sense, the MKP was among them), supposed that they would gain support among them.

The outcome of the election only partially fulfilled the hopes of the NPP and the Communists. Sociologist-statistician Lajos Máдай pointed out that in most counties, even in those villages where the number of poor peasants (*szegényparasztok*) exceeded three times

⁴⁰ See: Anna Wessely – György Csepeli: "The Cognitive Chance of Central European Sociology," in: *Replika* Vol. 4. No. 1-2. (1992) 17.

⁴¹ See: Dénes Némédi, *A népi szociográfia* [Populist Sociology], Gondolat: Budapest, 1985. 173.-177.

the figure of property-holder peasants (*birtokos*), the Smallholders Party won. Only in the southeastern region of the country, in Békés and Csongrád, the Communist Party managed to gain more votes than the FKgP in the most deprived communities. While in western Hungary, the MKP failed to reach its national average even in the less developed districts (*járás*).⁴² Thus, it shows that the agrarian population did not vote according to the official expectations: far from “class warfare” in the village, the less well-off strata of the peasantry usually followed the middle- and well-off peasants in terms of political adherence. These peculiarities of the distribution of votes in rural communities can lead to several conclusions. For one, it shows that the class-identity is not the adequate context in analyzing the 1945 election results. Second, it indicates that voters had other, even stronger electoral allegiances they needed to conform; that there remained voices in the local discourse that were more authentic than any party propaganda could have been.

The approach of sociologist Jason Wittenberg is preeminently revealing in this matter. Analyzing the long-run electoral persistence in Hungary during the twentieth century, Wittenberg focuses on the role of local institutions in shaping political opinion. His main hypothesis is that local religious organizations, which preserved their institutional frameworks as well commitment to them by the community, managed to transmit a political sentiment, what would become rightist electoral loyalties after the fall of communism.⁴³ Though he asserts that the correlation between church attendance and “rightist” majority in popular vote is stronger in Catholic communities than in Protestant ones. For the political situation in 1945, he infers that the stronger the attendance was in a given village, which – he assumes – is the marker of the church’s prestige, the more the electors supported the FKgP regardless of their class identities. He argues that the Smallholders differed from their

⁴² Lajos Máday, *Az 1945-ös választási eredmények demográfiai összefüggései*, 48-50.

⁴³ Jason Wittenberg, *Crucibles of Political Loyalty: Church Institutions and Electoral Loyalty in Hungary*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2006, 50-54.

adversaries in two respects that made them the natural choice for religious voters: first, some of its leaders were prominent members of the Calvinist Church, and second – as it was already mentioned – the Catholic clergy came out in favor of the party.⁴⁴

The “Church as context” theory presents the problem of voting preferences from an utterly different angle than the previous explanatory frameworks: shifting the focus from the narrowly defined political domain to the cultural sphere, it implies the option of reduction of scale in analysis. Unlike the master narrative of Hungarian historiography, which attempts to understand the electorate’s decision from a macro-scale perspective attributing or surmising firm ideological commitments to the villagers, Wittenberg’s account implies that voter preferences lay on the influence of local institutions or rather, authoritative and authentic agents. At the time of fundamental transformation when living circumstances became extremely unpredictable, interpersonal communication and spaces for experiencing “groupness” obtained a growing importance. Participation in political undertakings was anything but common practice for the vast majority of residents in rural communities in 1945. Thus, more embedded forms of communion also served as plenum for shaping political awareness as well for creating consensus or rupture within the community. Yet, Wittenberg’s interpretation – in a rather unexpected turn – echoes the analysis of the Party’s Central Committee about the election. For Rákosi concluded that the most serious challenge for the evolution of the Communist movement was posed by the Church and religious thinking. Moreover, Wittenberg implicitly affirms that, since church-goers were less likely adhere or voted for Leftist political organizations, the MKP’s base was recruited from the non-practitioner and therefore, non-religious elements of rural society. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the followings, the fact that the Party performed better in those villages, where church adherence declined, does not imply that voters preferred the Communist Party

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 58.

because of their atheist convictions.

2.3 Irregular Voters: the Case of Nagyvarsány

So far we have seen that the macro-scale narratives of the electoral preferences proposed four important variables, which shaped deviation of votes between the party lists. The first was ideological affiliation or more precisely, the development-question; according to the argument, the electorates' choice lay between the various alternatives of Hungary's future development the parties offered during the campaign; thus, the voters supported the political force, which seemed to be serve their personal interests – those, the landless masses voted for the agrarian-populist or the collectivist agenda, while the middle and upper strata supported the bourgeois-democratic way. The second was the question of national independence and the relations with the Soviets as an occupying force; here I have argued that the multifarious experiences with the foreign army could have shaped the citizen's attitude towards the problem. The fourth was class identity; according to the argument, the voters more likely chose the party that was supposed to represent the social strata they associated themselves with. In many cases, the first and the fourth variable are overlapping; however, as I emphasized, the regional differences and the cultural settings often led to inconsistency between the two. For instance, the less well-off stratum was surely a beneficiary of the land reform, yet, in the Transdanubian region, even the majority of landless agrarian residents voted for the FKgP. In the eastern territories however, the votes of the lower class split between the Communists and the NPP. The National Peasants Party performed above its national average in the northeast and certain counties of the Great Plain, whilst the MKP won the underdeveloped rural areas of Csanád and Békés, the counties famous for their agrarian socialist past. During the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in early twentieth century, the social tensions erupted in spontaneous revolts

and land grabs; although this pattern did not maintain in the interwar period, the non-Marxist but firmly collectivist initiations preserved in the collective memory of the locals and became part of their identity. The fourth variable was the degree of religious activity: the research of Jason Wittenberg concluded that linearity can be found between strong Church adherence and “rightist,” anti-Communist affiliations.

At this point it should be recognized that the sophisticated macro-scale model holds some incongruence in two respects. For one, the variables in question were introduced to explain individual decisions in casting ballots. Yet the model compares communities according to their social stratification (as Má dai claims, the villages inhabited mainly by property holders were more likely voted for the FKgP) and regional attributes (the communities in the Transdanubia were considered as firmly religious, while Békés was historically the “most atheist county” based on its low performance in church attendance). Second, the model explains only the regular cases, the choices of those communities and individuals who did not differ from the pattern of a given region or from the affiliations of a given social group. To overcome these discrepancies, I shall introduce another approach of inquiry that involves a reduction of scale in analysis as well the shift from quantitative models to qualitative methods. Examining how tribal societies maintain their ethnic boundaries and inner social order, ethnographer Fredrik Barth introduced the explanatory scheme of transactional (or generative) models. He claims that social organizations are articulated, subsisted and manifested through transactional relationships between individuals or collectivities. These are always vis-à-vis relations based on the optimalization of restricted range of material or immaterial values. Barth vows that although such interactions are not systematically governed by reciprocity, “there are limits in most cases to the losses

inequalities and gains.”⁴⁵ Barth also reminds that in constructing models, the analysis of irregular or marginal cases bear importance, since these examples would highlight the reasoning behind individual choices.

The electoral preference of Nagyvarsány in 1945 firmly applies to the category of irregular case. This remote village is situated in the northeastern borderlands of Hungary on the edge of the administrative boundary between Szabolcs and Szatmár counties as well on the margins of three ethnographic region, the Rétköz, the Nyírség and the Bereg. Although the village was closely connected to the neighboring town of Vásárosnamény (which is over the River Tisza in Szatmár), Nagyvarsány was embedded in the economic complex of Northern Szabolcs, which was dominated by two grand estates, the duke Odeschalchi family's and the Rochlitz and sons'.⁴⁶ In Nagyvarsány, only the latter owned land and run a distillery. As the Rochlitz family presumably became a victim of the Holocaust in 1944, and as the other grand-estates had been distributed between the claimants, the property regime transformed radically, and it was supposed that the setting of status-hierarchy would be altered as well. However, Szabolcs county was different in a sense. Contradicting to the myth of “The Flight of Gentlemen,” the state officials and landowners prevailed in the countryside, which posed a hindrance to the Communist Party. Far from giving in to the Leftist offensive, the county chief István Erőss (representing the FKgP) reorganized the public administration by employing the administrative professionals from the interwar period. His supposedly autocratic style of leadership caused ongoing clashes between the local MKP and the County Hall: Erőss was accused of having given legal aid to former landowners; his behavior was

⁴⁵ Fredrik Barth, *Process and Limits of Social Life: Selected Essays of Fredrik Barth*, Vol I, (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul), 1981, 38-39.

⁴⁶ *Magyarország földbirtokosai és földbérlei. (Gazdacímár)*. [Landowners and Land Tenants of Hungary] Bp., Magyar Kir. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1937. 432.

exposed even the plenum of the Hungarian Parliament.⁴⁷

On the level of local policy, the conflicts between the “rightist” civil administration and the newly established state police (under the Communist influenced Ministry of Interior) occurred on daily basis. Moreover, the local party organizers of the MKP and the Smallholders Party elicited criminal investigations against each other: the reactionary past or purported anti-Semitic utterances were often among the reasons. The land distribution process also became the target of heavy criticism, however, this time, popular grievances were also involved apart from political skirmish. The county was vastly problematic, since in many communities the number of claimants exceeded the amount of arable land, it seemed to be almost impossible to reach an agreement on an acceptable distributive pattern. And as the Communist Party posited itself in the forefront of the “struggle for land” by gaining the largest share of representation in local Land Distributing Committees, the public disappointment and outrage caused enormous effects on the Party’s electoral performance in Szabolcs. Although about 40% of the population had no landed property prior to World War II, the new holders did not show much sign of gratitude towards the MKP. The Party reached only 10% of the votes (7% below the national average), while the FKgP won 63%. In the northern four districts of Szabolcs, in the area of Rétköz, the difference was even more striking: the Smallholders share altered 65% to 73%, while the MKP’s was between 7% and 10%.⁴⁸ The NPP came second with 15% (two times the national average), and its share in the Rétköz districts altered between 12-17%.⁴⁹ Despite the unquestionable domination of the Smallholders, the NPP and even the SDP managed to win in certain villages. Rather surprisingly however, the workers party did not capitalize in those towns having industrial

⁴⁷ Pap, La Hongie Libérée, 207.

⁴⁸ László Hubai, *Magyarország XX. századi választási atlasza*, 166-168.

⁴⁹ *Magyarország statisztikai helységnévtára. 16. Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg megye*. [Statistical Gazetteer of Hungary] (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal), 2000. 89.; PIL 284/3.3 Summary sheets of the 1945 National Assembly Elections

capacities or being commercial centers. Thus, the Communists did not manage to gain the majority of votes except for one case – Nagyvarsány.

Prior the election campaign, the local representatives of the MKP increased the adherence to the Party: according to the Communist Party's unpublished statistics, by June 1945, approximately 200 member joined the Party, that is, over 12% of Nagyvarsány's adult population.⁵⁰ This was the second largest figure in the Rétköz; only Ibrány, a town with three times population figure, had more impressive numbers with 13% that is, 920 members. As the election results demonstrated, the Party statistics were not entirely reliable: in Ibrány for instance, the MKP gained only 7 more votes than the number of adherents was. In other communities, the Communists were unable to mobilize their alleged membership. The exceptional success of Nagyvarsány raises the question whether the local organizers had different strategy in convincing the residents in lobbying for support, or we can assume the existence of a variable, a social or cultural determinant, which turned the distribution of public trust upside-down. Regarding the riddle from the angle of social history, Nagyvarsány did not differed from its neighboring villages in terms of social stratification: the distribution of landed property was extremely unbalanced: over two-third of the arable land was in the hands of three landowners, while the 57% of the holders had a 1-5 acres farms, while 34% of the adult population had no land at all. However, these numbers did not differ from the regional aggregate; Nagyvarsány was anything but exceptional in terms of the unequal distribution of economic capital. Although, the analysis of the cultural field may elucidate the missing element.

A report from an “audit committee” (*repülő-bizottság*) sent out to survey the communal Party organizations in November, 1946, shed light to the distinctive feature of the area. According to the Party supervisor, “the county is characterized by sectarian activity.” In the

⁵⁰ PIL 284/16. 212 The Szabolcs county – Organizational Department

Party jargon, sectarianism usually meant ideological deference, attachment to apologetic interpretations of Marxism-Leninism. In this context however, the cadre alluded to a slightly different phenomena, since he attached further explanation in brackets: “(Baptism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventism, etc.).” He also added that the non-confessional groups “more or less supports our Party;” and that there were two towns, where the sectarian activity is exceptionally significant, and those were: Nagyvarsány and Ibrány.⁵¹ From the perspective of the surveillance body, whose members visited the countryside like the church supervisors or inquisitors in the Early Modern period overseen the doctrinal integrity of the movement, the explanation of the Nagyvarsány results was obvious. The informal networks of sectarian movements intertwined with the Communist Party’s local institutions, and – for the time being – the cooperation proved to be fruitful for both sides. These findings *prima facie* erodes the explanatory force of the macro-scale model in a sense that it demonstrates: the MKP might have been able to channel believer groups as well. However, it is also plausible that non-conventional believers chose the Communist Party exactly because it adamantly argued in favor of the limitation of the institutionalized churches’ (and especially the Catholic) influence in the political decision-making. Yet, the phenomenon also implies that joining a sect or participating in the communist movement had the same meaning in local context: it was an act of revolt against the traditional, interwar institutions of authority, and against the local establishment.

Leading figure of the young sociologists and sociographers “populist” movement Imre Kovács (notwithstanding, the party secretary of the National Peasants Party in 1945) published his research in 1937, under the title *Mute Revolution*.⁵² The official public opinion scandalized by Kovács’s narrative on the living circumstances in rural Hungary, and he was even accused with incitement. The book discusses the various forms of what now scholars

⁵¹ PIL 274/8.54 Summary Report of the Audit Committee sent to Szabolcs county. Budapest, November 25, 1946

⁵² Imre Kovács, *Néma Forradalom* [Mute Revolution], (Budapest: Pallas) 1937.

would call passive resistance against the social and political architecture of the Horthy regime. One of the chapters presents the spread of sectarian movements in the countryside: the emergence of neo-protestant confessions brought by mainly former emigrants to the United States, was not a legitimate issue during the interwar period.

The legal framework of religious affairs distinguished three forms of confessions: accepted, tolerated and unacknowledged. From the neo-protestant religious groups, only the Baptists reached the status of being tolerated in 1905, while the other groups remained unacknowledged. By the beginning of the 1920s, the so-called Christian-nationalist regime was entitled to increase the role of accepted churches in various spheres of public life including public life. Nevertheless, this undertaking could be construed as an attempt to exercise indirect control over the rural masses by indoctrination.⁵³ At the same time, the state started its own building the institutional architecture to survey the sectarian movements – and as Imre Kovács implicitly affirms, the counter-revolutionary had a good reason for it. For – he claims – the growing tendency of conversion to non-conventional religious movements in the 1920s mirrored the discontent and dissatisfaction of the less well-off strata of agrarian population. However, unlike the turn of the century, no wide-spread agrarian movement emerged, since experiences of the Soviet Republic disqualified the Leftist or progressive political language and undertakings. Thus, masses expressed their frustration by creating religious communities. Sectarianism – Kovács concludes – was a form of secession- not for gentlemen, but for the peasantry.

The “Mute Revolution” scenario in evaluating electoral preferences certainly has many compelling aspects in evaluating electoral preferences: first, it stands on the ground of methodological individualism, while it asserts that “groupness” (the communal interaction sin

⁵³ Csaba Fazekas, *Kisegyház- és szektakérdés a Horthy korszakban*, [Non-conventional Churches and Sects during the Horthy-era] (Budapest: Látószög), 1997, 168-169.

a confessional group) also shapes the personal views on politics. Second, it connects the formation of social identities in terms of the rural underclass with the transformations in the cultural field – although in a rather Marxist vein. The problem is that it seems to be difficult to measure the correlation between confessional adherence and the distribution of votes, since the activity of the sects had not been recorded for understandable reasons. The only non-conventional confession, which had been institutionalized and therefore, its activity was recorded, was the Baptist Church. However, the degree of adherence could not easily be reconstructed, since for one, their members hid their affiliations in front of the authorities; and for two, the church accepted the believers officially (via baptize) adulthood. Furthermore, there were no institutional statistics left about the size of the local churches. However, the adherence of the Baptist Sunday schools has been recorded. Analyzing the regional (Rétköz) data, only 17 out of 73 villages had Sunday Schools. In most cases, only a dozen of pupils attended these lessons, while in Nagyvarsány, the number went up to 195.⁵⁴ In a village, where the total population was 1648 included 462 male earners, the figure suggests that a considerable part of the town was converted to Baptism. However, it should be mentioned that the good performance of the Communist Party and the existence of Sunday schools are not strongly correlated: the MKP gain votes below its regional average in some communities having Baptist communities.

To draw preliminary conclusions, Nagyvarsány, and to an extent, the whole Rétköz suggests that behind the settings of the official discourse of the MKP, which purported a Manichean split between the various groups of the rural society, the adherence to parties as well the electoral preferences were shaped by other, rather cultural elements. Whether participating in the Baptist Church was just only a form of symbolic resistance against the post-feudal autocratism of the Horthy era, or a sign of chiliastic commitment, it seems rather

⁵⁴ *Magyarország statisztikai...* 89. Statistical Yearbooks of the Hungarian Baptist Church

plausible that at least in some cases, the “mute revolution” of sectarians ended in the Communist Party.

Chapter 4: Land Reform and Local Power

This following chapter will discuss the communal conflicts erupting during the process of land distribution. Here, I will argue that party politics and class tensions are not necessarily the adequate contexts for analyzing local disputes. Analyzing the archival documentation of the actual implementation of the reform, deciphering how local residents might have interpreted the bill and examining the symbolic content of their debates, it becomes obvious why it was strenuous to grasp the dynamics of these debates. Since contemporary scholars are accustomed – unwittingly – to employ the linguistic universe of political speeches, propaganda and official documents. The figurative language and categorical schemes provided by the Party – or in that respect: the parties – were used by locals as well, when they attempted to negotiate with higher authorities, or in public utterances. Although, in most of the time, they spoke the language of “popular democracy” with accent or speech impediment; even local party cadres used the formulas incongruently, with a lot of mistakes, which officials from higher levels corrected. Therefore, the land distribution on the local level, I assume, was an educational moment, when each and every rural community was encompassed into the discourse of “popular democracy.” Moreover, land distribution was inasmuch about the redistribution of power, competence and purportedly, honor within the community: the Party emerged in remote communities seeking for local cadres to represent them; while villagers also delve for new patrons.

The reconstruction of the local understanding of “popular democracy” will entails two phases: first, the Party’s history (*párttörténet*) narrative on Communist’s infrastructural expansion in 1945 will be deconstructed from its schematism, by reconstructing individual

life-course of certain cadres. The second part will point out the manipulative strategies of the actors, the methods they managed or failed to mediate between the power and the village.

For the twentieth anniversary of the Liberation, the Committee for Historical Memory of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party's Szabolcs county branch aimed to publish a series of publications about the workers movement local history in 1965. A request was sent out for every basic organization of the Party asking the veteran members to write collectively a minimum three-pages account of the foundation of the local Party group. The reports were written, sent, collected and well overviewed: the members of the Committee altruistically corrected the documents with blue pen if the authors were proved to be wrong on certain factual details.⁵⁵ The documentation was meticulously stored, but never published; the books on the local workers movement's history did not cite any of these recollections. It is rather plausible that the procedure was part of the institutionalized practice, what Igal Halfin coined the "Communist Archive." According to him, the Stalinist party amassed evidences about its members in the 1920s and 1930s. The comrades' past utterances and deeds were recorded in order to be reexamined and reinterpreted in the light of new evidences. The practice of remembering – Halfin suggests – "was a creative process to establish a deeper truth about the past."⁵⁶ Kádár's "Khrushchikov" party however, did not use these recollections for punitive reasons. Instead, the function of this seemingly superfluous procedure was to override personal memories, to create a situation, where veteran party members retell the Party's official narrative as if it were their personal recollections.

For the vast majority of the reports are astonishingly schematic; most authors used the utterly unimaginative party jargon in depicting the events. Apart from the well-known

⁵⁵ SZSZBML XXXV. 161. Reports about the History of the Hungarian Communist Party's local organizations based on recollections.

⁵⁶ Igal Halfin, "The Demonization of the Opposition: Stalinist Memory and the »Communist Archive« at Leningrad Communist University," in: *Kritika: Explorations of Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol, 2. No. 1 (Winter, 2001) 68.

narrative elements as “the village welcomed the liberator Soviet troops enthusiastically” or “the local members stepped up firmly against the enemy/clerical reaction’s treachery in the execution of the land reform”, the overwhelming majority of the recollections were almost identical in two respects. First, the local group was always founded by landless agrarian polestars; and second, the Party always won the support of the villagers. If we add up the figures the authors gave about the electoral performance of the MKP in 1945, it would turn out that the Communists won the election – in fact, as I mentioned, they gained 10%. Such examples suggest that the compliance towards the senior leadership, or the need of self-identification with the official memory might have been the motives behind the production of the file.

Luckily, someone always misunderstands the task. The party secretary of the village of Oros recorded the stories told by his elder comrades without any sort of self-censorship. His story presents the “heroic days” from an earth-bound perspective. The local party was established in January 1945, and became widely unpopular right away, since a company of former Arrow-Cross members and gendarmeries dominated the group. Contrary to other files, in the Oros case, the party was run by artisans, mercenaries and other, dubious professionals including an actor, Endre Cimbolinecz (his acting name was Endre C. Turáni) who – according to the narrative – had played in anti-Soviet propaganda movies during the war. One can also come to other conclusions in regarding the leadership skills required in local politics. While the official often emphasizes the devotion to the movement and to the cause of the working class, in Oros, grandiloquent speeches and heavy drinking habits were the fundamentals of good political management. Drinking was also a crucial element in the land distribution process, since the local Committee often gave its audience in the local pub. Nevertheless, the decision-makers were bribed most of the time: as the story goes: “one liter of palinka, one acre of land.” At first, district and county officials overlooked the activity,

and they were not helpful anyways – according to report. For most of the time, when the agitators appeared from the county center, their adamantly anti-religious speeches alienated the villagers even more.⁵⁷

Here, I would not suggest that the Oros-case is more representative than the other schematic and prefigured recollections. It is, overall, a representation, and as such it is neither more true nor more realistic. It does not refer to what actually (and factually) happened in the village during the land distribution; however, it does mirror how the events were perceived and reminiscence memories. It clearly suggests that for the local understanding, exercising power relied on skills, which seemed to be exceptional in local context – as in the case of the Cimbolinecz, good acquaintances, and well-managed reciprocities. The fact that the prehistory of Socialism turned into a corruption case in Oros, did not refute any grand narratives of the land reform, although, it suggests that the agents involved in the process – whether they were claimants or decision makers – acted upon mental schemes alternative to “class consciousness.”

There are nevertheless, other features, which indicate that the social and cultural composition of the MKP membership was less homogeneous. In Ibrány and the neighboring town Nagyhalász, both were the strongholds of the Communist Party despite the bad performance in the elections, the leading figures of the Party were recruited from two distinct cultural milieu. The official narrative discusses the common undertaking of Dr. Emil Földi and Antal Fábián. While Földi was an educated person, who obtained his medical doctorate in Budapest, Fábián was a smallholder prior to the end of the war. At first glance, their upbringing and social status designated diverging life-paths for them. Yet, they belonging to the cohort, in which everyone perceived the same life-event. Having served on the Eastern

⁵⁷ SZSZBML XXXV. 161. 57. Report of Oros

Front in World War I, and having spent a considerable time in Russian prisoners of war camp, they both got acquainted with the Bolshevik movement.⁵⁸

A social history of the Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia during the World War I is yet to be written. Here, I delimit myself to mention that captivity bounded together young men from various, but – according to their view – discriminated groups of the turn-of-the-century Hungarian society. The middle-class Jewish Földi and lower-class Fábián both became sympathizers of the Bolshevik movement. During the 1930s – according to the collective memory – they formed a clandestine cell, though their affiliations did not remain unnoticed by the authorities. After the Soviet troops came in, it was their Russian knowledge that launch their upward mobility in terms of public esteem, as they were able to negotiate with the Soviet troops. Soon, due to the cultural capital once acknowledged as a handicap, Földi became high profile elected official of Ibrány, while Fábián led Nagyhalász.

While the life-stories of the “fellow comrades” were recorded in an almost hagiographical way, it has to be mentioned that the local power did not pertain to them during the given period. In Ibrány, another founder of the local MKP, Mihály Czifronics became the strong man of the Party. There is no information about his prewar circumstances, except that he had a negligible size of household plot.⁵⁹ What party documents neglects, and probably he never revealed it, that he was not only the member of the Baptist community in Ibrány, but served as a teacher in the Sunday school; this position does not involve that Czifronics was cleric, though.⁶⁰ Yet, he might obtain certain degree of social capital that may helped in organizing the party. Given that the adherence was relatively strong in Ibrány, we can assume that his former engagement to the Baptist Church provided him a solid background within the party.

⁵⁸ SZSZBML XXXV. 161. 77. Report on Ibrány; SZSZBML XXXV. 161. 82. report on Nagyhalász

⁵⁹ SZSZBML V.135./b Minutes of meeting, Ibrány council October 12, 1945. Ibrány

⁶⁰ Statistical Yearbook of the Hungarian Baptist Church, 1933, 46.

From early April 1945, he became the chairman of the local Land Distribution Committee, and from that position, he attempted to take over every elected body of the village. By late autumn of 1946, he presided the LDC, the Production Committee, the local National Council, and the municipal council. Nevertheless, by relying on the town's collectivist affiliations, he founded Hungary's first "Popular Cooperative" (*Népi Szövetkezet*) in February, 1946.⁶¹ During those years, Czifronics had a controversial reputation among higher level party cadres. An Audit Committee report from 1946 suggests that he had radical, "extreme left" (*balra hajló*) views, and Fábián and his wife should be preferred by the center.⁶² His leadership skills were also questioned by his comrades. In a denunciation sent to the Central Committee, he was accused of financial misdemeanors, and that he "had incestuous relationship with his daughter. Soon the woman gave birth to a child, who was killed by the couple and the corps was burnt in the stove." The delators concluded: "therefore, we ask the Central Committee to exclude Mihály Czifronics from the Hungarian Communist Party."⁶³ However, his position was not threatened, for Czifronics had the sense how to satisfy the propaganda needs of the Politburo with the creation of the cooperative. In 1948, he – among the whole crew of the cooperative – was decorated with the recently founded Kossuth Award.

As we have seen, the Party erected written monuments to those cadres with predilection, whose life-course grounded the pre-established assumption about the continuity of the workers movement. However, the case of Czifronics warns that the Communist Party was vested in the social capital of rather unconventional members of the movement.

So far we have seen cases, where the local Communist cadres managed to elicit some support; however, this was not manifested in the national assembly elections. In the

⁶¹ SZSZBML XVII. 23. Report on the Foundation of Popular Cooperative February, 21, 1946, Ibrány

⁶² PIL 274/8. 54 Report on the state of MKP organizations in Tisza district, February 11, 1947.

⁶³ PIL 274/13. 25. Petition for the Organizational Department, March 12, 1946, Ibrány

following, I shall present other examples, when the Land Distribution Committee could not mitigate the problem. It would be rather reasonable to suppose that in Nagyvarsány, where the party's performance was more than convincing, the local Party group was well-organized. However, that was not the case. The local organization was founded by Szűcs B. Bertalan, the cousin of Szűcs B. András, the charismatic leader of the Baptist Church.⁶⁴ Thus, the connection between the religious group and the Baptist Church needs no further clarification. Despite the extraordinary performance in the elections, the local organization itself was divided into two.

For a veteran artilleryman, Béla Lakatos and his circle – most of them also veterans from the Eastern front during World War II – joined the Communist Party and started questioning the leadership of Szűcs. Following the pattern we have seen in the case of Czifronics, they took control over the so-called Production Council. It was an economic body that controlled the previously private but after the war, state run agricultural factories. In the Rétköz, where the production of fruits was considerable, the distilleries proved to be economic congestions. Lakatos and his company ran the business, first in the name of the Production Council, later, they established a “worker's cooperative” for the distillery.⁶⁵ However, as an investigation revealed and the district organizer, András Kajáti also recalled it in his memoirs, the “cooperative” was just a concealment for a veritable enterprise.⁶⁶ The members – Lakatos' circle in the Party – owned it basically as shareholders. Their activity became known in front of the authorities, when local producers started complaining about the high prices they demanded for the service. As a result, the group was expelled from the Party and Lakatos was removed from the Production Council.

⁶⁴ András B. Szűcs was remembered in the Baptist weekly journal *Békehírnök* Vol. 49. no.14. p. 54.

⁶⁵ SZSZBML XVII. 22 Minute of National Committee meeting, July 12, 1945, Nagyvarsány

⁶⁶ SZSZBML XXXV. 162. 24. Recollections of András Kajáti, November, 1964. Nyíregyháza

The village of Tuzsér also experienced turbulent months during the land distribution. The Land Distribution Committee was dissolved and reorganized three times between May, 1945 and February, 1946. According to the narrative of the fourth chairman of the Committee, Pál Túróczi, who later became the party secretary in the village and the president of the village council, the first Committee was dissolved because of the popular complaints against its activity. Then, in September, 1945, a new Committee was founded with only three members – two of them were brothers, while the third was a relative of them. The Lévai brothers were well-known in the village; their father moved there in the 1920s, and had a artisanship in the so-called New End (*Újtelep*), a resident area that had been established in the early 1920s due to the limited land reform of the conservative government.⁶⁷ The elder Lévai became a self-made community organizer, as he set up a football team for the neighbourhood, and – allegedly – participated in the local Baptist community.⁶⁸ At the time, Tuzsér – apart from Nagyvarsány – became an important center for the confessional movement. Thus, the Lévai brothers were supposedly able to mobilize a considerable part of the village on their side.

In September 21, 1945 around fifty people gathered in front of the town hall shouting the resignation of the Land Distribution Committee. And as an act of revolt, they immediately elected the Lévais as responsible for allotting the plots. Their less than two months chairmanship was entangled with scandals, atrocities and police investigations. According to the accusations, the brothers made parts of the former grand-estates facilities demolished, and sold the materials; and they also were charged for stealing other goods from the manor. Although the two brothers – István and Pál – renounced, they did not accept the allegations.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ SZSZBML SZSZBML XVII. 501 1.d Minutes of the joint meeting of the MKP SDP and NPP local representatives, July, 29, 1945. Tuzsér

⁶⁸ The Baptist Statistical Yearbook from 1927 to 1932 record a Sunday teacher called Lévai, but he cannot be identified exactly.

⁶⁹ SZSZBML XVII.58 I/2/1946 Petition of András Lévai Csontos to the National Council of Tuzsér, January 7,

The third brother, András, who was not involved himself in the case however, remained in the village and became the president of the local UFOSZ, the National Organization of New Landowners. Thus, the family did not lose ground entirely in the village.

In the denunciations against the Lévai brothers, the charges of having been members of the Arrow-cross party often came up. After the memoirs of the residents of Oros, it is not surprising that former collaborators joined the Party. However, it could be plausible that the Arrow cross membership – as the accusations – was created retrospectively. Yet, in every village, the National Councils were responsible in screening public officials – and there is no sign that the Lévai brothers were cleared. However, the charges against them, or rather the explanations about their motives were improved: the first denunciation mentions the Arrow cross membership, but the second accuses them of having collaborated with the village's notary, the so-called Horthyst official, Miklós Bethlendy. However, the connection between them is not probable, since Bethlendy was not among the beneficiaries of the redistribution of lands executed by the brothers. Their alliance was part of the political imagination as the author of the denunciation attempted to make sense of the local conflicts in front of a higher party plenum. He simply shifted the context: in the village interpretation, the conflict broke out because most claimants from Újtelep objected the allotment of household plots established by the first Land Distribution Committee. However, in a party document, the debate was presented as the struggle with the reaction.⁷⁰ The Communist Party provided enormous resources for local cadres to organize their base; yet, the most effective weapons were the labels they use in settling debates.

To conclude, during the immediate postwar period, the Communist Party – like any other political organizations – witnessed an influx of new members, however, the vast

1946. Tuzsér

⁷⁰ SZSZBML XVII.606 II/1/1946 Report of the Land Distribution Committee of Tuzsér to the Land Distribution Council of Szabolcs county November 4, 1946, Tuzsér

majority of them had no connection with Leftist political groups before. Some of the new members, as we see, parlay that the membership opened the way towards important positions in village institutions. Reading it from a social historian angle, the political self-made men such as Lévai, Lakatos or even Czifronics used their social capital, the network they were able to mobilize, to gain political power. And then, they used their political capital in order to elicit private appropriation of public goods and services. However, in most cases the community resisted the attempt, since the relationship between decision-makers and villagers was not reciprocal.

Conclusion

On August 15, 1945 János Kádár commented the discussion at the Central Committee plenum. One of his colleagues warned about the growing grievances against the Party in the countryside, which was due to the abuses of power by local Communist officials. Kádár disagreed: “Rural dictators can be useful for the Party during the elections. The Communist Party is treated as an authority, and it could be advantageous [...] People turn to the Communist Party as if it would be an authority, and they will do so at the time of elections.”⁷¹ As the election results showed, the future party-secretary was wrong – or was he?

This study attempted to present how the Hungarian Communist Party evolved its infrastructure in the countryside during the immediate postwar period, and what was the popular reaction to it. By implementing the asymmetrical counter-concepts of “working people” and “reactionary,” the new political establishment aimed to enforce a change of elites in rural communities as well. I also argued that the land reform should be construed as means for depriving the traditional elites from its economic background. the Communist Party identified itself as the *avant-garde* of the landless groups of rural society; however, the social perception was absolutely different. Those who participated in the movement often considered it as the means of upward mobility; those who were reluctant to join, treated it as an organization of the new self-acclaimed ruling elite. Class solidarity did not work well when few went up on the social escalator due to their adherence to political movements, and others from the same strata were unable to accumulate economic capital to the same extent.

⁷¹ PTI 274. f. PB F. 27 az MKP KV Politikai Bizottságának 1945 augusztus 15.-i üléséből [the August, 15, 1945 meeting of the MKP Central Comittee]

Despite the intensive Communist agitation, it seems that the traditional forms of persuasion were more effective. While the reform enormously enfeebled its economic positions, the high clergy spoke out against the Left publicly, and local clerics transmitted the message to the rural communities. Furthermore, the majority of well-off and middle-peasants were also in favor of the Smallholder's Party. As purely economic acquisition does not always imply the increase of honor, the loss of property does not lead to a diminution of someone's influence on the community. Although the wealthy peasants and the local intelligentsia were pushed from the political decision-making during the land distribution process, their social esteem often remained intact among the villagers.

The case of Nagyvarsány, albeit it seems to be exceptional in a sense that the Communist Party managed to win, grounds the claim that rural electorates were less aware of the consequences of their ballots in terms of national level politics. For them, the political competition was interpreted in local context. Moreover, the case shows that the Party unwillingly channeled confessional groups, which were marginalized under the interwar regime. This seeming paradox however, can be solved, if we suppose that prior to 1945, sectarianism was a covert form of social criticism among peasants.

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