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— Tomáš Kasper

Celebrating May 1: Visual Propaganda from Different Perspectives in Communist Hungary¹

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Abstract Celebration has been a key idea in the disciplinary fields of *Mentalitätsgeschichte* and anthropology: my paper aims to introduce this in the specific context of May Day parades and marches in Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on the educational nature of the communist system. For decades, verbal and visual propaganda tried to indoctrinate students and their parents and teachers by transforming perceptions of everyday reality through cultural prac-

tices and quasi-religious rites. From the perspective of theories about political religion, statues and symbols intended for the unification of leaders and masses in ceremonial-festive surroundings were meaningful elements with both continuous and changing characteristics. I would like to analyse this kind of message associated with May 1 through photographs of official processions in Budapest, choosing a concrete place as a starting point and adding verbal sources and different dimensions to the interpretation. First, party documents, minutes, and preparations establish the basic level of my approach, showing the original (and contemporary hidden) intentions of the ruling power to organize and execute International Workers' Day. Next, propaganda and photographs of children and students demonstrate how the main celebration of the communist era was staged in order to legitimize its acceptance and popularity. The discussion concludes with a counter-narrative compiled from reports of the US legation and archives of Radio Free Europe, presenting an anti-communist view and a construction of Western propaganda.

Keywords propaganda, visual studies, political indoctrination, celebration of May Day

¹ This paper is a significantly improved version of my study that was previously published in Hungarian, see: Somogyvári, 2019a.

Introduction

It was obligatory for students and children to participate, in some way, in the parades (at least in this period). Taking place outside schools in a form of extended education, the events played an important role in political socialization. According to German historians, we can define communism as an educating dictatorship (Barck, Classen & Heimann, 1999, p. 230), because every citizen had to acquire the proper behaviour and communication in ideological contexts, and May Day was the perfect occasion to do this. The learning process moved from educational institutions to the streets, and schooling of society emerged in many transitional forms (rallies, seminars, political trainings at workplaces, etc.). From the intended and propagated images (in the Hungarian corpus) to the grey zone of prohibited jokes, expressions of ignorance, and resistance towards the celebration (reflected in American reports), a great variety of possible everyday life-strategies and changes in attitudes existed depending on specific situations (for an example of this research approach, see: Kestere & Fernández González, 2021, pp. 22–26).

In my study, I connect represented space (particularly Stalin Square, later renamed Parade Square) and time (May Day) with the purposes of political power, examining the realization of celebrations from official and informal viewpoints. These events are essential to our historical knowledge and cultural memory, which needs deeper reflection. In so doing, I have formulated the following hypotheses:

1. Propaganda had an overall effect on everyday Cold War life and influenced discourses both in Eastern and Western Bloc countries with controversial accents.
2. May Day and other newly established or transformed communist celebrations and anniversaries created a festive culture that was closely linked to the ideological-political sphere; to a certain degree, the participation of children and adults was necessary.
3. These events gave the community a complete audiovisual experience that aimed to fulfill the goals of political socialization and indoctrination and produced the widely known *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) of everyday understanding about our past.

4. The cultural meanings of a celebration, including its beliefs, symbols, and figures together with its continuous and discontinuous elements, can be interpreted in the context of political religion.

In the communist/socialist period, a specific visual culture was developed; activities and propagandistic images had different functions and generated a parallel universe of an imagined society, one dominated by a political ideology (Dussel, 2018) and mobilizing masses (Kenez, 1985). My research focuses on Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s, when the communist power was firmly established in the first half of the decade, as well as the period following the 1956 revolution, especially after 1962–1963, when a soft version of the dictatorship was restored; the ideological background and its manifestation was very similar throughout the two decades. In selecting the visual sources for this paper, I considered two main aspects:

- A – The photographs appearing in the study must show the central location of the nationwide celebration, namely Heroes Square and Parade Square in Budapest; these were the iconic places of May 1 in Hungary.
- B – The chosen images must clearly demonstrate the organizational-representational character of the parade.

Theoretical Background

First and foremost, we should take into consideration the functions and purposes of multisensorial propaganda, including some remarks relating to theories of political religion. Celebrations with mass parades were powerful ruling techniques in the communist system, and in each of the satellite countries after 1945 they shared common cultural features modelled on the original Soviet example (Rolf, 2013). In the era of modern communications, the impact of these events was maximized through the press, radio, and television; festivals like May Day legitimized and stabilized totalitarian regimes (Wirsching, 2008, p. 411) by instrumentalizing traditional rites (remembrance, evocations of the future), places and symbols (statues, squares, images of founding fathers and present leaders), and activities (marching, holding flags, etc.). One can discover signs of the cult and quasi-religious elements

in the commemoration of legendary figures like Lenin, Marx, and Engels (on the Lenin cult, see: Somogyvári, 2019b; Stalin was added to this pantheon in the late 1940s and early 1950s) or in musical performances and the acoustic dimension of the festivals (Polyák, Szabó & Németh, 2021). Community participation was crucial to the communists in forming an ideologically conscious identity among younger generations, and they employed elements of staging and theatrics in pursuit of this goal. In representative publicity, the political power showed itself in front of the citizenry; in this context, the leaders and masses observed one another and created a spectacular sight (Marchart, 2004), and that is one of the main topics of this paper. I also want to focus on the ways children and students were involved in these activities and how they were represented.

Reflecting on the spatial turn in social sciences and humanities (Withers, 2009), places and the occupation of space form the second important theoretical aspect of my research. In the twentieth century, communist and other authoritarian and totalitarian politics extended their reach to the streets. Protests, the erection of new sculptures and demolition of old ones, the renaming of avenues and even whole cities, and changing urban scenes are all clear expressions of this (on the origins, see: Vörös, 2009; Dent, 2018). In this process, public and private spheres intertwined and ideology infiltrated homes. Ordinary activities and discussions became political ('in a "totalizing" environment where everything necessarily became political', see: Johnson, 1996, p. 290). The party strictly politicized everyday life in the Rákosi era, the name typically given to the hardcore period of communism between 1948 and 1956; but the next decade (Kádár consolidation or soft communism) moderated this direct intervention and reestablished a differentiation between the private and public spheres. Participation in the May Day parades was, however, still mandatory.

The Basic Level: Where and How?

I focus on the main iconic spaces of May Day parades in socialist Hungary, namely the Dózsa György boulevard in the centre of Budapest. National journals, radio, and television broadcasts highlighted two

points along the parade route that served as venues for the grand tribune of the party leaders: Sztálin tér (Stalin Square) and Hősök tere (Heroes Square). The location of the grand tribune changed from year to year, as we will see.

A big city park, Városliget, and its greenery provided the backdrop for the celebration, and all of these places can be seen on a map dating from approximately 1950 (Image 1).



Image 1. The two focal points of the May Day parade in Budapest (Budapest térképeinek katalógusa 5060, 1950 k.).

This cutout from a larger map shows two elliptic circles emphasizing the main points of the parade route, with Stalin Square in the lower part of the image and Heroes Square at middle left. The two points are connected by the Dózsa György boulevard, and three quarters of the map to the right is the Városliget park. The dual nature of May 1 was demonstrated explicitly, with the squares, statues, and tribune lending the event an official ceremonial atmosphere. Meanwhile, the park was even more important for the cultural memory because it hosted leisure activities such as sports, and cold beverages and food (e.g. the widely remembered sausage and beer) were served there. These features

are part of the communicative memory of a society (Assmann, 2011). Remembering communities reflected actual space and time coherently with several emotions ranging from nostalgia to forgetting (Rekšć, 2015).

The squares have multilayered historical meanings. Built in 1896, Heroes Square was originally conceived as a monument to the millennial anniversary of the Hungarian State in 1896. In the centre of the square stands a column, and on top the archangel Gabriel holds in his hands the holy crown of the country and the apostolic cross, and our greatest historical figures gaze out from the colonnade extending to both sides. During the Rákosi years, the Habsburg monarchs were replaced with symbolic notabilities who had fought for independence. This was in accordance with the communist historiography, which assessed fights in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as antecedents of people's democracy after the Second World War. Until 1953, the square was the location of the grand tribune, as seen in Image 2.



Image 2. May 1, 1950. Fortepan/Magyar Rendőr, 67623.

This and the following images were primarily taken from the Fortepan database, which is a Hungarian community-based photo archive housing digitized private and museum collections. As of December of 2021, the archive contained more than 100,000 freely available images, and the number is increasing continuously (<https://fortepan.hu/en/>). These records are easily found with searches using keywords relating to the celebration (i.e. május 1/May 1) and the location (Felvonulási tér/Parade Square). The second image captures a typical example of how a totalitarian political power, in this case the communists, occupied and transformed a space. The focal point of the photograph is a huge poster depicting the new Trinity – Lenin, Rákosi, and Stalin – hung beneath an angel, a traditional symbol of Hungarian statehood. Banners with slogans and other representatives of the international workers' movement were positioned so as to cover the traditional sculptures and hide the prewar memorials from the masses. The white tribune dominates the perspective, like an extension of the monument. In the middle is the VIP area for Rákosi, the central leadership of the party (MDP KV), and invited foreign representatives. The biggest personalities were duplicated; Rákosi, for instance, appeared not only in person but was also present in the form of a large painted portrait. The physical presence of the leaders and the symbolic images of heroes in the workers' movement made the celebration easily acceptable, unifying the composition of statues, massive images, and the party officials on the tribune (both national and international) in one magnificent spectacle.

The pedestal of the new Stalin Monument was finally completed in time for May 1, 1953, (after the Soviet dictator's death), and from this year onwards, Stalin Square was the central point of the procession and was the place where the party, positioned up high on the tribune, waited for the masses of people, who remained below in the square. During the 1956 revolution, the statue was destroyed by protesters and was never rebuilt. In the spirit of de-Stalinization, the square was renamed Parade Square.

For May 1, 1957, the grandstand at Heroes Square was restored, and the events of that day were the subject of the first nationwide

broadcast on Hungarian TV. This was a special occasion, because from 1958 to 1989, every parade would once again pass in front of the tribune at Parade Square, where only the pedestal of the Stalin Monument remained. It was transformed into a grandstand, a symbolic gesture how the new Kádár-regime separated and continued the Stalinist years at once in 1960s.

The central bodies of the Hungarian Workers' Party (HWP, in Hungarian: Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP) organized all the details of the celebration in advance, as Imre Mező, the secretary of the Budapest Party Committee (the first person in the capital) proposed in 1955:

'First, two flags, a red one and one with the national colours (red-white-green), then the pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. Next, portraits of the members of the Political Committee, and finally the logo of May 1. There shall be four red lines followed by three national colour lines and two lines with blue flags, a globe, and images and flags of people's democracies and their leaders. In closing, there will be 200 folk dancers and a May tree, after which will come the youth and the districts [of the capital city].' (Szóbeli beszámoló..., 1955)



Image 3. May 1, 1955. Fortepan 84062.

Today, the name of this square, '56ers, commemorates the revolutionaries who pulled down the statue of Stalin in the afternoon and evening hours of 23 October 1956, leaving only the boots in place (hence the colloquial name of the time, Boots Square), but Image 3 shows the previous state of the monument. The crowd is organized, though not in the manner proposed by Imre Mező. Two years later, another party document said the following about the routine:

'On May 1, people are usually gathered for hours and march in seven columns [...]. So far, the practice has proven that they come in seven columns and rows of ten.' (Jegyzőkönyv, 1957)

Colour photos from the 1950s are very rare (Image 3 is originally colourful, here in black and white), and this one certifies the importance of May Day. The fifteen-metre high statue of Stalin and abundance of red flags dominates the perspective. Visible in the background are the green park and a fountain, a typical and conventional springtime scene. The large square takes up the foreground. One can clearly distinguish seven columns and approximately ten people in each row led by marchers carrying large panels with the Roman numerals III, XIV, XVIII, VIII, XI, XXI, and V. With the exception of V, which is the downtown district of the capital with the buildings of the ministries and parliament, the numerals represent the worker districts of Budapest. Marching together were workers, intellectuals, and leaders in an explicit display of participation by the whole of society.

The event also has an acoustic dimension, as stated in an *a posteriori* evaluation:

'We have managed the problem of great spaces, in which, until now, the voice of the masses was always lost. We made a sound system this year, so that the crowd is inspired and agitated by its own noise.' (Beszámoló..., 1955)

We should not forget that these events were originally intended as multisensorial experiences for both younger and older participants

(on this new sensorial approach to schooling and socialization, see: Grosvenor, 2012). Music, vibrations, the smell of sausages, immersion in a large rally to the sounds of singing and chanting, and visual cues of red, blue, and other colours everywhere one looked all served to heighten the overall effect. According to the idea of Leninist monumental propaganda, the political actors made use of architecture, sculptures, and expressions of art in organizing space and symbolizing the omnipotent presence of the leaders and founding fathers (Kruk, 2008).

A Better Generation for the Future

The propaganda always used children as a representational form of hope for a better future. To varying degrees, the politicization of younger generations seems to be the first significant aspect in the analysis of the following pictures. The second aspect worth considering can be found in scenes of organized and uniformed groups of pioneers suggesting harmony and common, clear goals. Political religion is one possible theoretical framework in which to interpret the verbal and visual compositions in this chapter. The sacralization of politics (Gentile, 2000) was meant to create heaven on earth by making a new communist/socialist man for the world. It began with the proper upbringing of children, and communist saints and festivals imitating religious characteristics can be easily understood in this regard (Kula, 2005). My dissertation focused on visual representations of teachers, students, and parents in Hungary in the 1960s, established through some 5,371 photographs published in pedagogical journals (Somogyvári, 2014). Later, I expanded this research to encompass the 1950s as well, with the primary focus falling on the May Day celebrations. Image 4 is one item from the continuing work and was originally printed in an official ministry journal.



Image 4. Cover of the journal *Public Education* (Köznevelés), 1 May 1955.

The pairing of monuments with celebrating students is a familiar visual topos in communist propaganda. Another frequent Hungarian example is that of children playing around the Liberty Statue, an emblem of the liberation (in fact the occupation) of the country by the Soviet Red Army at the end of the Second World War. From a retrospective point of view, we address the Stalin Monument as a political product, but it was also a work of art, and its creator, the sculptor Sándor Mikus, explained his original intention: ‘The huge figure stands still, but with such motion as if he was about to speak to the people gathered around him’. Stalin’s gesture was open and invited everything in an intended ‘cultic focus for demonstrations’ (Fowkes, 2002, p. 79). The composition of the image, which was photographed from below and shows the leader standing tall over the people amassed around him, is a consequence of both symbolic and technical issues. The traditional heroic setting elevates the superior leader and the marching children above the viewer, yet this was entirely natural in the era of twin-lens reflex cameras. The photographer had to look at the scene from above, with the camera hanging on his or her belly, thus the image was captured not at eye level but from below. Retrospective analysis cannot determine the degree of theatricality in this case. Did the anonymous photographer intend to

portray the scene from the below, or was it merely a technical issue? The question is a clear example of the limitations encountered in the visual study of such artefacts.

The children are wearing pioneer uniforms, their red scarves and belts with fine buckles leaving little doubt about the ceremonial character of the event and their affinity with a specific group and community. They raise the flags of their country and their squad (10. raj). Participation in military-like activities and outline, such as uniforms, holding military ranks, hierarchy of patrols and squads, divisions and marches with banners, badges, lineups, and so on, was desirable among children. Marching under flags was a typical rite in this organizational form. The feelings suggested by the faces are enthusiasm, happiness, and joy (on the historical approach to this topic of feelings, see: Rosenwein, 2002). This emotional identification served pedagogical ambitions by teaching the meaning of celebration with pleasure, but as the process was repeated year after year, it was at risk of becoming formal and empty. There were two paradigmatic counterpoints for visually representing the May Day festive masses: an aerial one, from a bird's-eye view (Images 2 and 3); or photos of individuals up close intended to give the viewer a more intimate look at the experience (Image 4).

The next photo shows an interim perspective between the two aforesaid poles.



Image 5. May 1, 1964. Fortepan/Nagy Gyula, 50673.

The cameraman was walking together with the crowd and must have turned around to take this shot before recording the next sequence of the parade. We see a forest of red flags in the background of Image 5, which is colourful by origin (here in black and white), a vast multiplicity of the traditional communist symbol, and in front of this there are many pioneers holding model aeroplanes directed upwards into the air. At first sight, it seems a bit odd, but in a contemporary sense the symbolism is apparent. In addition to a decorative function, the aeroplanes bore several meaningful connotations relating to technologies and symbolic culture (Schatzberg, 2003). This is six years after Sputnik and only three years after Gagarin's space flight, and the example of the first astronaut heralded the future Soviet conquest of the cosmos and great victory over the United States and the capitalist hemisphere in the space race (Kohonen, 2009). As regards youth movements, this utopian thinking translated into competitions, popular pioneer aeronautics clubs, amateur radio broadcasting, and motor repair, all of which speak to a belief in the overall importance of technology and the modernizing promise of the communist system (Mincu, 2016).

Following the consolidation carried out in the Kádár era of the 1960s, the choreography of the celebration settled in its final form, with a strict and unchanged order of marching groups, photographic archetypes, and verbal messages in the headlines of daily journals. The representatives of the main worker districts of Budapest (five to eight columns, usually seven) and the administrative bodies marched first with big portraits of leaders on billboards, carried by commanders of lines – the same pictures were hung on the walls of the tribune. After them came working collectives from different companies and factories, followed by the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ/Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség) and then the pioneers, which is the stage depicted in Image 5. In the background, we see the red flags of socialist youth brigades. The procession was closed out by athletes and folk dancers. The sequence of marching invariably repeated every year, which is how the new rituals developed into a ceremonial routine.

From the Other Side



Image 6. May 1, 1968.
Balla, Demeter: *Filmesek a felvonuláson* [Filmmakers in the Parade] (Balla, 2018, p. 57).

This is the only photograph in my corpus for which we know the name of the author. As an independent artist, Demeter Balla portrayed May Day from the other, organizational side, which is mostly unseen in official images. Image 6 presents propaganda in progress and reveals the staging and theatricality of the celebration. The marching youngsters look in one direction, likely due to the cameraman, who is directing the scene with instructive gestures. This is István Mezei, who worked for Hungarian Television between 1956 and 1992; the young man with the audio and video recording machine on his back is the yet to become famous movie director György Gát (Fortepan helped me identify both of them). We can observe a double reflexion here: the filmmakers shoot the parade, and Balla captures them, adding another layer of May Day meanings and offering a look at the professional dimension of visualization experts. Mass media transformed the atmosphere of the central celebration after 1 May 1957, when the first public coverage was broadcast by Hungarian Television. The choice of year was not a surprise; only seven months after the revolution of 1956 and during the repression, the event and the two to three hundred thousand (or more) people who participated in it provided a legitimization of the power of

the old/new Kádár regime. It was broadcast on television across the nation despite the fact that few households had a device at the time.

In the last chapter, I will show some counter propaganda to the May Day celebration, which was taken from the US sources, namely the archives of Radio Free Europe and documents of the Department of State at the Budapest legation. The first corpus, accessible online to anyone, is administered by the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University (<https://www.osaarchivum.org/>). By conducting an advanced search using the collection of Radio Free Europe Information Items and the geographical term 'Hungary' and keyword 'May Day', we find four reports documented by a confidential source (presumably a refugee) about May 1 of 1953 in Budapest. There is a play on words based on the distinction of May 1 as the day of spring (*kikelet*) and patriotism (*hazaszeretet*); with modified phrasing and pronunciation, the words can be made to mean 'everyone must march' (*ki kellett vonulni*), though the true desire of the participants was to go home (*haza szeretett volna menni*, see: A May Day Joke, 1953). The situation following Stalin's death was unique, as the political power distributed more alcohol in the afternoon yet ordered stricter policing in the evening (May Day in Budapest, 1953). Soldiers and police officers stood positioned every five paces along the parade route on Dózsa György boulevard and on Stalin Square. This was unusual, and combined with lower participant numbers compared with previous years, the climate was apathetic (How May Day Was Celebrated This Year, 1953; Fewer People, More Order for May Day 1953).

From another year, Carl R. Sharek, the second secretary of the American legation in Budapest, commented on the 1962 television coverage as follows:

"Masses of people walking... No order [...] No enthusiasm on faces, only when camera focuses at close hand and then the usual 'mugging'. (The lack of enthusiasm recalls to mind the statements made by professor at Eotvos Lorand University, engineer from Coal Institute and journalist at party last night when in reply whether they would march today stated they have been

told to go and therefore will be present). [...] Pretty rowing girl reporter [...] interviewing group of college students. After usual canned responses as to their interest in May 1 interview lapses into discussion more important matters – pretty girls in parade line.” (Informal Impressions..., 1962)

For a few days in 2018, I was able to download documents like these from the Gale Unbound Archives (records from the US State Department): this description and the short reports above it show a completely different face of the parade and reveal that people were forced to be there. The American officers tried to uncover the weak points in the system that led to the unhappy facial expressions and other negative symptoms.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to express different transitions of perspectives (near and far, friendly and hostile) to give multiple meanings to the May Day parade. It seems that organizational-technical issues and representation of the celebration were considered by the communist leaders to be more important than real content. The specific visual semiotics and effect of the propaganda, for which the communication and language were completely changed, constituted perhaps the greatest (albeit underrated) performance of the system, and for the most part they can be found in the details. Propaganda and its effects were crucial for both sides of the Iron Curtain: in the Eastern Bloc, the parade was a showcase, including its legitimation of power and attractive elements; meanwhile, from a Western point of view, the celebration might have seemed empty and formal. Between the two poles – the festival of the working people vs. the forced parade – many different attitudes can be discerned, and avoiding simplified interpretations requires the use of various verbal and visual sources. Spaces such as Parade Square and the statues and tribunes and time (May 1) are inseparable and constitute a significant element of our cultural memory and knowledge about the socialist past. It is necessary to study this phenomenon in greater depth, reflecting and contextualizing it without nostalgia or conviction. The real historical knowledge

and invention of such studies may lie in the ability to attain a closer everyday perception and interpretation of the represented communist power in its different participatory modes in celebrations through the use of official intentions, propaganda works, and counter ideas, such as those I have found in American sources and egodocuments and other informal records from these years.

Literature

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