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CONTEMPORARY HISTORY DISCOURSES IN HUNGARY AFTER 1989

Abstract

The article discusses the current position of Hungarian historiography towards the role of recent history in the Hungarian identity and its relationship to domestic policy. The democratic transition after 1989 contributed to a substantial change in historical scholarship through the dismissal of censorship, the opening of archives and the lifting of the ideological pressure on research. However, the change of the historical self-portrayal of Hungary after the fall of the communist regime was an element of the democratic transition. The author describes the process of the use of historical arguments in forming national attitudes and self-identity by several political circles in Hungary over the last three decades, with special attention paid to the activities and ideas of József Antall and Victor Orbán. The experiences of the 1956 revolution were initially focused on as an anchoring point for national identity after the fall of communism. In the course of these years, the centre of political attention shifted to the proposed anti-communist and anti-left-wing interpretation of Hungarian history from March 1944 to May 1990, and, as author points out, it is aligned with the attitude of the ruling circles. The author notes the substantial state's initiatives in the field of the politics of memory in recent years, especially in the early formation of the 1956 Institute (est. 1991), then the Institute of the 20th Century (*XX. Század Intézet*, est. 1999), the House of Terror Museum (*Terror Háza Múzeum*, est. 2002), the Institute for the Research

on Communism (*Kommunizmuskutató Intézet*, est. 2011), the Research Institute and Archives for the History of Regime Change (*Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató Intézet és Archivum*, RETÖRKI, est. 2013), the VERITAS Research Institute for History (*VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet*, est. 2013), the Committee of National Remembrance (*Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága*, NEB, est. 2013), and the Institute of National Heritage (*Nemzeti Örökség Intézete*, NÖRI, est. 2013).

Keywords: Hungary, communism, democratic transition, politics of memory, 1956 revolution, József Antall, Victor Orbán



Three decades since the beginning of the democratic changes in Hungary are a short time in the history of historiography. It is extremely difficult to draw up a report of these years that would cover all the issues of historiography—even if it was about a relatively small country like Hungary. The Hungarian historiography of this period was presented most comprehensively in mid-2012 by two young historians: Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor (Trencsényi and Apor 2007). According to them, fundamental changes have taken place in this field, out of which, interestingly, the dissemination of theories and methods of social history were the most important. Hungary has also experienced an apparent generational change (but not revolutionary) as well as some methodological innovations of Western historiography. Despite this, the “guild” of historians remained adamant in its strong objectivist attitude (which could even be called a consensus). Trencsényi and Apor took into account not only academic but also public discourse. They noted that parallel to the process of de-ideologization of the former, the latter was being *reideologized*. In their opinion, *historians* participating in public discourse are, to a large extent, researchers poorly integrated with the “guild” or excluded from it, staying on the periphery of the field and unanimously opting for a nationalist perspective. In their publication, the authors also asked the following fundamental question:

“It remains to be seen—and most probably will be the topic of the essay somebody will write in 2015 about the Hungarian historiography of the first decade of the third Millennium—whether this apparent plurality will have a *paideistic* value. That would entail the socialization of the old and new

participants into a communicative culture where one has to accept the existence of radically divergent approaches and ideological directions and, what is more, learn to translate them into one's language in order to utilize some of their findings. Alternatively, plurality might well lead to the formation of mutually exclusive sub-cultures, based on specific internal norms of selection and vehement emotions towards the »insiders« who seem to possess the truth, and towards the »uninitiated«, who are at best »uninterested« or right-away »inimical«. In this case, it is a further question whether it will be possible at all to retain the plurality of sub-cultures in the long run. It may happen at some point that some political elite in power will tilt the balance to such an extent that it will become possible to re-impose a certain ideological homogenization.” (Trencsényi and Apor 2007, p. 63).

Trencsényi and Apor still then believed that Hungarian historiography:

“[...] will be able to reformulate itself in a way that valorizes multiplicity not only in terms of the usual post-Herderian (or post-modern) legitimation, according to which every national culture adds something to the completion of human culture, but in the other direction as well, realizing that a culture gets richer and more interesting, and opens more windows to the external world, by the multiplicity of the pasts, sub-cultures, and alternative intellectual canons it manages to incorporate.” (Trencsényi and Apor 2007, p. 63).

The following partial report is precisely an attempt to answer the question of whether this has actually happened. This will be achieved by presenting the general characteristics of the current situation—in which I analyse the politics of memory taking into account its general assumptions, discourse, and institutional dimension.

Before 1989, the elite of Hungarian historiography (namely the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and at most several university departments at one or two universities plus several independent renown researchers at various institutions) was part of the cream of European scholarship. This group lived on a small island



of freedom, relatively less restricted in freedom of decision, information exchange, and opinion-forming. In these conditions, significant works were created, including the entire creative output of the authors; schools were formed, and personal and business contacts were established across borders (Gyáni 2010). It could be argued that this elite—taking into account their personal experience of academic democracy—has generally opted for liberal and democratic values. After 1989, the situation changed, and opportunities opened up for almost everyone who was able to take part in an unrestrained international and national debate. However, research on recent history was then in a particular situation. As in other countries of the Soviet bloc, there was *hardly any* historiography of the most recent scholarly history in Hungary before the fall of communism. Historians could not freely express opinions or disseminate the results of their research (very few decided to publish in the underground circulation or in the West as of course in this way they could write freely.) The entire field of scholarship was, as a matter of fact, established after 1989. In comparison with the previous situation, progress was therefore evident.

The year 1989 seemed very fortunate also for many other reasons. Firstly, the Soviet-type system not only controlled and limited scientific and humanities research, but paradoxically also gave it the status of a higher authority. Also of course, in the relatively most liberal countries in this respect, Hungary and Poland, only the research that was committed and “correct” from the ideological point of view was called “academic”. This perception was one of the levers of the communist modernisation project. Equipped now with this kind of authority, recent history researchers have become one of the main participants in democratic transformations. In 1988–1989, they could explain, without hindrance, the importance of the recent past for the emerging democracy.

Secondly, another thing that happened in Hungary in 1989 was the “Archival Revolution”. The system’s information monopoly ceased to exist, and various archives became available. In the case of some research teams, the process was particularly challenging (and still is difficult, as in the case of archives on political police, foreign affairs, etc.), but the fact that it was a breakthrough is undeniable. That said, the Act on

Personal Data Protection of 1992 limited access to files, so only “researchers” who had “a statement of support of an institution established to conduct academic research” gained rights. In this way, democratic legislation has, not in a very democratic way, established a virtual hierarchy of professional researchers.

After 1989, a number of challenges awaited historians of modern history (as well as, of course, researchers of other epochs). One of them was connected with the rehabilitation and release of communicative memory (Assmann 1999) and on multilateral interpretation (Gyáni 2010b; Gyáni 2012). Until the end of the Soviet system, there were mythological and cult stories about the national past. They were inherited and passed on, but not really widely disseminated; the dissemination was happening, but only to a small extent; see (György 2000) on this subject. This traditional *collective* narrative concentrated on politics and nation—exploited, betrayed, and innocent. The particular experiences of each participant or witness of events have finally come to the fore. After such a long silence, if there was no confrontation between the different experiences, it worked like lightning. Access to the memories of Western emigration was extremely limited, and in Hungary only designated people from the group of authors presenting the official interpretation could comment on them. It was similar to the publications in the underground circulation—although memoirs were placed there, they did not reflect the pluralism of collective memory. An example was the independent magazine *Beszélő*. One can read on the theoretical aspects of this situation in the Hungarian and international context in (Kovács 2008). The second challenge was to undermine the authority of scholarship, which was taken over from its predecessors and apparently strengthened during the period of political transformation. Who else, other than historians, supported the cosmopolitan *communist vision of the past*? The third challenge was the need for methodological renewal. Epistemological doubts and skepticism also affected the academic micro-community, who worked for a new historical legitimacy of democratic transformations. The challenges added up. “Research” in vain indicated, for example, that the trend which came to the fore is, in fact, a memory shaped by the new situation and filtered through the experience of thirty years of Kadarism. The conflict has become inevitable.

The biggest challenge was the new politics of memory. In the last phase of the Soviet-type system, this policy had less and less influence on historiography. In fact, it was limited to the supervision of a few taboo issues. This was particularly the case in 1956 when the critical moment was not 23 October or even 4 November, but actually in December 1956, when the Kádár regime was set up. The official interpretation of 1956, canonical and carefully guarded, stopped being willingly conceptualised already a few years after the revolution. Memorials, created within the framework of the former politics of memory, were not numerous or perceived by everyone as *empty*. In 1989, the politics of memory began to reach for new aims, and the history of Hungary began to be explained in a more pluralistic way. The representatives of the political sphere reported a need for history—each of them for their own ends. Sooner or later, each of them began to claim exclusivity for their particular narrative. In Hungary, however, the use of history, the intensity of the phenomenon, and its dynamics have taken on a specific form—on the use of history, see for example (Black 1995).

The political elite is always keen to use historical arguments as is also the case in Hungary. Among the forces that took part in the political changes, it was the liberal opposition to a Soviet-type system (the representatives of this trend defined themselves in the publications of the time as the “democratic opposition”) that primarily referred to the democratic chapters of recent Hungarian history. These chapters included modernisation and the anti-nationalist radicalism from the beginning of the 20th century, the democratic opposition of the Horthy era, and in particular the democratic and left-wing ideological trends of the post-war period (especially the thoughts of István Bibó, whose “discovery” is a merit of the democratic opposition) and 1956. The nationalist-popular opposition trend originated precisely from the opposition to Horthy’s rule, and for a long time, it seemed that it would adopt the democratic traditions of the periods after 1945 and 1956. It also seemed that it would contribute to the development of an everyday discourse necessary to undertake collective actions and achieve common goals. The symbolic space of 1989 was dominated by history, including the memory of the revolution and the uprising of 1956.

The shared history, however, soon came to an end. In the new democracy, the participants of public life took a different view of the need for historical legitimacy. They built their identity unevenly based on a common, historicising language—and even used different stories in its construction. When the first law on the historical significance of the events of 1956 was drafted in the new democratically elected parliament, the seemingly common politics of memory turned out to be fractured. The winners of the election, the leaders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), overlooked the name of Imre Nagy in the text of the resolution. In doing so, they made it clear that they rejected the leftist interpretations of the revolution and its symbolic leader (who was a communist). The differences became even more pronounced during the disputes over the coat of arms of the Republic of Hungary and national holidays. Instead of the so-called “Kossuth Coat of Arms” from 1956, they opted for a coat of arms with a crown that was in force until 1944, and the 20 August was nominated

Replica of the Budapest Stalin Monument, showing the statue as it was after protesters demolished it on October 23, 1956. Memento Park, an open-air museum of Communist era monuments and statues. Budapest, Hungary. May 28, 2019.
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to the status of a public holiday, equal to both the 15 March and 23 October. This meant that the focus was shifted from the commemoration of the late-modern democratic and independence movements to an emphasis on the thousand-year-old historical continuity of the Hungarian state, within which the issue of democratic emancipation could best be emphasised. The new Prime Minister, József Antall, was a historian by education, so it can be assumed that this turn of events was the result of a conscious decision.

Antall made it possible—without any exceptional successes—to take up the issue of vetting of the members of parliament and officials, and reparations for the victims of communism, but he was not very active in other areas of politics of memory. Despite various attempts, he did not change the institutional shape of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA). Instead, he respected the autonomy of universities, the effect of which was that university staff did not change for some time. The archives of the communist party (1948–1989) were nationalised, but the remnants of the former party archives and party history institute were transformed into a research institute of recent history, only moderately linked to the Hungarian Socialist Party. The only newly established institution dedicated to research in the contemporary Hungarian history was the 1956 Institute (1991). The establishment of 1956 Institute proved the unique role that the memory of the revolution played during the period of political changes. The second new institution is entirely related to the name of George Soros, who also supported the 1956 Institute. The Open Society Archives were established in 1995 within the framework of the Central European University and has since become a significant research institution and archive of contemporary history, using modern methods in its work.

In the first years after the fall of communism, the strongest opposition to national conservatives was the liberal side of the political scene. The liberals made attempts to develop an alternative vision of the past, in which a clear emphasis was placed on the opposition and critical activities against the Soviet system (which the conservative side tried to present as unimportant at the time). At that time, the socialists were passive in this respect for obvious reasons—many of their leaders came from the second or third row of the elite of Kádár's

time. After winning the 1994 elections, socialists made several gestures (the party leader and Prime Minister Gyula Horn ostentatiously placed a wreath on the grave of Imre Nagy) but left the politics of memory to their coalition partners, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). From then on, national conservatives began to emphasise their anti-communism, which until then was just one of the elements of their eclectic politics of memory. When in 1998 the Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ) formerly a liberal-alternative group, which at that time was changing its point of view to a national-conservative one, won the elections, its leader Viktor Orbán partly drew on Antall's achievements. The thousand-year-old Hungarian statehood has once again become the centre of the politics of memory, rhetoric, and symbolism. In 2000–2001, a real ceremony was conducted in which the crown of St. Stephen was moved from the National Museum to Parliament and placed in the centre of the most representative and impressive hall under the dome of the building.

Antall was also associated with the view that the era of communism was a “dead end” in the history of Hungary. According to this thesis, the events of 1944–1945 interrupted the (legal) continuity of the Hungarian statehood. The only exception to the whole post-war period was the year 1956—one mythical event that lasted only for a moment and remained ineffective. In the meantime, Orbán inscribed the year 1956 very strongly in the narrative of the politics of memory on the subject of recent history. According to it, in the years 1945–1990, Hungarian society experienced a series of injustices that gradually and without any exceptions touched the entire community. The repressions had a double character: on the one hand, they were created by foreigners (Soviets) and on the other hand by the Hungarian left. In order to develop and present this narrative, new institutions have been created. The Institute of the 20th Century was established in 1999 to deal with the period after the World War II, and the Institute of the 21st Century in 2001 to study the new Hungarian democracy. At the same time, in 1998, state support for previously established institutions dedicated to recent history (such as the 1956 Institute and the Institute of Political History, which were supported by both the MDF and socialist governments) was withdrawn.



House of Terror (*Terror Háza*).
Budapest, Hungary.
February 22, 2016.
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Finally, in 2002, the House of Terror was established, which in the new narrative, served as the central memorial site. Its permanent exhibition established a direct continuity between the Hungarian Nazis and the communists. This opinion was supported not only by the accidental fact that the secret communist police seized the abandoned headquarters of the Hungarian Nazi staff in 1945. According to the creators of the House of Terror (the most important of which was Mária Schmidt, political advisor to Viktor Orbán, director of the Institutes of the 20th and 21st centuries and the House of Terror), the main criterion of continuity was violence. However, according to the exposition of the House

of Terror, the violence used by the communist regime was more widespread and overwhelming than, for example, the participation of the Hungarian state in the extermination of the Jews. Naturalism in the style of Madame Tussaud (torture chambers recreated in the basements) skilfully and on a large scale combined with interactive multimedia forms of the 21st century, together created a very suggestive form. The exhibition triggered strong emotions. The problem was its simplistic perspective and proportions. For this reason, the House of Terror has provoked a fiery debate and contributed to an even greater politicisation of the discourse on recent history.

The government of the socialist-liberal coalition, which returned to power in 2002, did not limit the activities of the House of Terror. The exhibition has not changed, and the museum has become an attractive destination for people with national and conservative views. It also became one of the attractions of Budapest. The socialists still had no answer, Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány only after his second election victory in 2006 presented his own initiative in the politics of memory—however, it was strictly addressed to his own political camp. He admitted that the Socialist Party had to choose between the legacies of Imre Nagy and János Kádár. He himself opted for Nagy and the leftist heritage of 1956. The Conservatives accepted this with mistrust, considering it empty rhetoric or even fraud, just as they rejected all other moves of the Head of Government. However, Gyurcsány's political *milieu* did not accept it with much enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, the discourse on recent history (along with the main dividing lines) also covered the period of political transformation. The growing extreme right-wing developed two old conservative theses on the subject, both coming from the early 1990s. The first one was critical of the transformation, mainly due to the lack of a radical exchange of elites. According to the second, the consequences had to be delivered against those who were responsible for the “sins” of the previous system. The radical right-wing claimed that there was no change of regime at all, because “old communists” hold all decision-making positions. Therefore, not only the perpetrators responsible for the old system but also the authors of the transformation must be brought to justice.



House of Terror (Terror Háza)—interiors.
Budapest, Hungary. May 28, 2019.
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In 2010, once again, the victorious right-wing, national-conservative politics of memory could draw on the experience of the past twenty years. In fact, it was supplemented with one element, peculiarly “modernising” the thesis from the interwar period, which stated that in the 20th century, every left-wing party was always anti-national in its aims, sometimes directly serving the foreign powers. This seemed to be a continuation of one of the fundamental areas of Horthy’s discourse, according to which the Treaty of Trianon was the responsibility of Hungarian liberals, radicals, leftists, Jews, and communists. The Declaration of National Cooperation issued in 2010 called the period 1990–2010 “decades of confusion after the transformation of the political system.” The preamble to the constitution adopted in 2011 stated, in some contradiction with the previous declaration, that “We proclaim that the self-determination of our State, lost on March 19, 1944, was restored on May 2, 1990, with the formation of our first freely elected representative body.” This step backward only shows that in the euphoria of the great victory of 2010, the politics of memory used completely extreme ideas, such as the concept of the “revolution” of 2010 (an expression used by Victor Orbán in his speech after the announcement of the 2010 election results). The national rhetoric remained unchanged, emphasising the injustice suffered, denying and postponing responsibility. The entire twentieth century is inscribed in the uniform history of national suffering. The history of Hungary is devoid of continuity, but its dead end is not just a Soviet-type system in all its forms. The narrative has been extended to include the negation of the value of modernisation (of the Western type). The number of socio-political *traumas* that had already dominated the discourse about the past may be increased by those from the period of political transformation. Among them, the subject of the extermination of Hungarian Jews, including the responsibility of the Hungarian administration and society for the deaths of more than half a million Hungarian citizens and the disenfranchisement of even more of them (Karsai 2016), is still not present.

After 2010 in Hungary, the state invested heavily in consolidating this vision of the past. A number of new institutions have been established: the Research Institute and Archives for the History of Regime Change (*Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató Intézet*, RETÖRKI), the VERITAS Research

Institute for History (*VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet*), Institute for the Research on Communism (*Kommunizmuskutató Intézet*), the Committee of National Remembrance (*Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága*, NEB), the Institute of National Heritage (*Nemzeti Örökség Intézet*, NÖRI), in which at least three or four times as many people are engaged in research into the history of the 20th century as were at the end of the previous decade. The research carried out there is generously subsidised—in the Hungarian budget for 2015, approximately HUF 3 billion was allocated to these institutions. In 2016 this amount was even greater as the government allocated 13.5 billion forints to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the revolution and the 1956 uprising, which are disposed by a committee headed by Mária Schmidt, the leading representative for the politics of memory of the FIDESZ party. More than half of this amount is planned to be donated to central ceremonies and other state celebrations). The heads of these institutions do not hide the fact that they set themselves an militant goal—to get rid of the “left-wing interpretation of history,” which, according to them, dominated before. A part of the strategy is the introduction of a new canon into centralised state education. This is only a matter of time as there is already a framework curriculum in place; also a whole series of uniform and compulsory textbooks is under preparation. Attempts were made to create and renew existing places of remembrance (in real and virtual space), a culmination of which was to be the Monument of the German Occupation, erected on Liberty Square in Budapest in 2015. Unexpected social resistance partially foiled this intention, because the monument, in fact, became an essential place of protest against nationalist politics of history.

From the above description, we can clearly see how one-sided this history is. The Hungarian right wing, from its folk origins through Antall’s conservative experiment to the right-wing radicalism of Orbán and his companions, has always *pursued* politics of memory. Many times (even today) one can get the impression that in relation to humanities and culture, the right wing is basically only interested in recent history. However, the silence of the Hungarian left on issues related to politics of memory remains almost unchanged. The efforts of the liberals to disseminate a realistic picture of their own nation proved to be inadequate and ineffective. The alternative

left-wing vision of the past is primarily defensive. And even if this is not always the case, at the heart of it is often an abstract understanding of progress and modernisation.

To some extent, this also applies to the period of the Soviet-type system. However, it does not bring any extraordinary successes. The current visions of the recent history of the individual political camps are incompatible. The “left-wing interpretation of history” faces the same dilemmas for the future as all non-political (or: non-nationalist-ethnicist) narratives about history. Just like all kinds of representations of the past such as conservative, avant-garde, and all those in between that are analytical and comprehensible, face the same dilemmas, or perhaps those in particular.

In the mid-2000, Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor in the text cited in the introduction expressed doubts whether a pluralistic Hungarian historiography would develop a discourse between camps of different methodological and ideological approaches. They also did not rule out a scenario in which particular trends would transform into subcultures, closed to each other and not undertaking a substantive dialogue. As they warned, in such a case

“it may happen at some point that some political elite in power will tilt the balance to such an extent that it will become possible to re-impose a certain ideological homogenisation.”
(Trencsényi and Apor 2007, p. 63).

More than ten years later, it can be said that modern Hungarian researchers of the recent history are guided by fundamentally different ethos in their work. There is still little dialogue between methodological subcultures. Today, political procurement contractors are primarily active on the national and conservative side, and they perform this role with extraordinary commitment. Although some conversations happen, there is almost no hope at the moment that debates within historiography will be conducted in a reasonable way on the basis of common democratic or professional values. Balázs Ablonczy saw it in a similar way:

“Historians and researchers of society generally note with resignation the lack of precise notions, the confusion of

orders, important and unimportant aspects, the interference of politicians in the sphere of collective memory; they address new and fiery appeals to the nation/society or to taxpayers in which they call for a pluralistic view of history. Unfortunately, that will never work. Because it cannot. (...) Public opinion still prefers simple explanations; there is no need for despair about it. Sentences starting with 'let politicians not interfere in this' will only make sense if the slogan 'Trianon' no longer evokes emotions among voters. Until this happens, politicians will talk about it. It will improve if we stop the suicidal tendencies and instead of 'Trianon or...' we say 'Trianon, so...'. If we understand and acknowledge the suffering of others and do not treat our own history as a game." (Ablonczy 2016).

The regime in power since 2010 is clearly striving for ideological homogenisation, and this goal is, of course, shared by the camp of national-conservative historians. A pessimistic scenario predicted by Trencsényi and Apor is now a reality.

A *positive politics of memory* could be an opportunity for the future. But do we *even need* such an approach? How would the relationship between historiography and this influential form of communicative memory look like? The question is difficult, not only with regard to the current situation in Hungary. A "positive" politics of memory means accepting critical and comprehensible descriptions of the past, encouraging such a perspective and cultivating a *tradition based on democratic values*. From such a standpoint, the answer to the first question may be affirmative. However, historiography—with its constant changeability, creation of new stories and dynamics undermining the truthfulness, approach, and method of previous narratives—should stay away from *any* politics of memory. For this, it would be enough to acquire knowledge, understanding, and guarantees of free debate, if any. A historian does not need politics of memory. Of course, regardless of what happens, it still exists and will exist.

At the beginning of 2015, the organisers of a discussion asked its participants, historians, whether historiography has the tools that could enable a nation to develop its own realistic self-image. Is there anything we can do about the actions of politicians trying to mythologize history and re-evaluate it?



House of Terror
(Terror Háza)—interiors.
Budapest, Hungary.
May 28, 2019.
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The answer to both questions is rather negative. Of course, proposals can be made on specific topics. For example, to indicate to what extent the research on solidarity and social traditions, workers' and peasant movements, social democracy, direct democracy of 1956, and the democratic opposition have disappeared from the Hungarian historiography agenda. For instance, in the European Union Framework Program Horizon 2020, one of the main priorities of the specific program in the field of social sciences called "Reflective Societies" has been entitled "Cultural opposition in the former socialist countries since 2014". So even if this topic is not particularly popular in individual countries, it does provoke some interest in the international academic world. However, the situation of historiography in Hungary will only change when the whole country frees itself from the impasse. This depends on the will of the Hungarian people and their determination.

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