

THE RETALIATION AFTER THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956 ACCORDING TO NEW HISTORICAL RESEARCH – AN OUTLINE

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1956 and the historical sources

Before discussing the historical problems of the post-1956 retaliation, I must say some words on the difficulties of interpreting its sources. It is evident, that during the Kádár-era no real investigation of these sources was possible. The revolution of 1956 was one of the biggest taboos of the communist regime, the main point of its ideology being the following sentence: „A counter-revolution took place in Hungary in 1956.” Therefore, historians were allowed to write on the events of 1956 as a counter-revolution and only ‘reliable’ historians had a possibility to get close to these sources at all. The research was made public and available to all historians only from 1989 as a peaceful transition took place in Hungary. Archives opened their gates and witnesses started to speak about their memories.

However, there are many problems with these sources. Although there is a huge amount of written sources, the greatest bulk of it was made by the communist-led authorities (they are police, state security and court files, minutes of the party leadership etc.) This is no wonder: anti-communist fighters and other „illegal organizations are rarely documenting their activities for common reasons”.² Another possibility is oral history. But the most important witnesses of the revolution were executed and those who survived had changed much during the thirty-two years of the Kádár-regime. After such a long time either in prison or in exile, most of their remembrance can be (and really is) distorted. It means that we have sources which are the least reliable according to the historians.³ They are one-sided and incomplete, and this is why historians have to treat them very carefully and with a highly critical approach.

In many cases, victims could not be rehabilitated based on surviving court documents even after 1990. A judge must rely on the available court files to make a verdict – and upon these files the trials seem to be a fair procedure, although they can be camouflaged political trials.

Koncepció per: communist show trials and secret political trials

The Hungarian legal history term *koncepció per* is usually (but unfortunately mistakenly) translated to English as ‘show trial’. However, show trial means a *public* trial, which is constructed, (pre)determined and enforced by political power, usually with

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² Tamás Meszerics, *Politikai ellenállás ’45–56*. Beszélő, 2000/9–10.

<http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/politikai-ellenallas-’45–56> (accessed 15 Sept. 2012.)

³ Ibid.



fabricated charges and it is quite similar to a theatre performance. In Hungarian using it is called *kirakatper* (literally, a ‘shopwindow trial’) which is only a type of *konceptciós* trials. Most of these trials were carried out secretly and this is why I would like to avoid using the term ‘show trial’. *Konceptciós per* means a trial with a political (pre)conception, where the aim of the process is not to find out the truth but to fulfill a political goal. In most cases, the confession of witnesses and the defendant was written and learned by heart and this was true even with the verdict. In short, every show trial is *konceptciós*, but not every *konceptciós* trial is a show trial, because it can be also a secret political trial.

One of the main questions historians have to deal with is whether these post-1956 trials were *konceptciós* or not. In this study I try to summarize the historical debate about this topic.

Retaliation after 1956

Although the government of János Kádár made several statements that no one will be punished due to the fact that he or she participated in the ‘events’, the retorsion started as early as in November 1956. The first phase was characterized by unlawful acts carried out by the freshly founded party militia and the Soviet KGB. These acts included deportations (even to the Soviet Union), internment, beatings and other sadistic tortures, mass killings by volley-firing etc. The first trials were carried out from December 1956 and in the beginning they were often open to the public – but not classic show trials. What is more, solicitors usually cited Kádár’s earlier statements on not only the impunity mentioned above, but also his words on „the glorious revolution of our people”. These brave solicitors were later kept away from the retaliatory trials or even fired. No wonder that the effects of these trials were not too impressive to the party leadership. So, these trials cannot be considered as show trials: neither solicitors, nor the defendants behaved as actors, no one gave them full texts to learn by heart and perform them before the court. As they were not show trials, does it mean they were not *konceptciós* either? The answer to this question is not easy, because these trials were ordered by the party leadership and they had a political aim.

In the later stage, trials became closed. Solicitors and judges were selected with much more care. New kinds of special tribunals were created. First, martial law was declared, then „accelerated” proceedings were introduced (i. e. trials without indictment). Finally, people’s tribunals were set up again, first in April in Budapest then in June in another four cities to deal with the acts of the „counter-revolutionaries”. These new tribunals were created by decrees of the Presidium of the People’s Republic and not by laws. Their main points were the following: they wanted to mix political and common crimes, capital punishment was expected in most cases, indictment was not necessary. People’s tribunals had much more severe peculiarities: they formed their judgments with retroactive effect, appeals were not possible in some cases, and *reformatio in peius* was possible even when only the defendant or the solicitor made an appeal – and therefore the decision of the court of appeal could have been amended to a worse one. Solicitors were to be chosen from a list created by the party officials; naturally, only ‘sound’ and ‘reliable’ lawyers were selected.⁴

⁴ See Frigyes Kahler, *Joghalál Magyarországon 1945–1989*. Zrínyi, Budapest, 1993. 40–41.; Tibor Zinner, *A kádári megtorlás rendszere*. Hamvas Intézet, Budapest, 2001. 105–160.

From mid-1957, trials were not public anymore, they were implemented behind closed doors (partly because of international outcry). Most trials (and capital punishments) were carried out in 1957 and 1958, including the most famous one, the trial of Imre Nagy, the prime minister of the revolution, who was sentenced to death and executed in June 1958. The number of executed people is disputed, but most historians claim that there were 229 death penalties. However, others state that this number is somewhere between 400 and 500. Most of the 229 executed who are known by name were young men (usually under 35), fighting as armed rebels. To the astonishment of the party leadership, they were mostly workers and therefore members of the 'ruling' working class. They were charged with plotting against people's democratic order, armed rebellion and/or murder.

During the 1990s, two points of view developed among researchers relating these retaliatory trials. Historians at the 1956 *Institute* claimed that these trials were not *konceptciós*, or at least not 'constructed', although they had *konceptciós* elements. This standpoint suggests that there is a big difference between the 'classic' (pre-1956) *konceptciós* trials and post-1956 retaliatory trials. In the classic trials, confessions were forced, victims were tortured both physically and mentally. After 1956, beatings and other sadistic act were not common or even only accidental. However, mental or psychological torture was general. Classic trials were based on fabricated charges only but retaliatory trials were not constructed, charges were based on real facts committed by the fighters or 'rebels'. In the first half of the 1950s, everyone could have been a victim of these trials; however, the main problem for the communist authorities after the revolution was that the number of the 'enemies' (i. e. the revolutionaries) was so high that neither the tribunals nor the prisons could cope with such a big mass of 'criminals'. So, it was not likely that innocent people were accused as there were plenty of 'dangerous counter-revolutionaries' available. There were also big differences between the juridical independence of these two periods. Judges were not independent at all before 1956. After the revolution, however, they had some room to maneuver and became at least partly independent. In a classic trial, defendants had to prove their innocence, but later the courts at least tried to prove they were guilty. Post-1956 trials were not entirely false, but the facts they contained were distorted and stripped of their original meaning.⁵

Other researchers, who are mainly jurists, stated that many of these trials were entirely *konceptciós* and even constructed. One of them, Frigyes Kahler even tried to redefine the term *konceptciós* trial. According to him, every trial is *konceptciós*, which has a political aim (instead of wanting to reveal the truth) and for that reason, facts in the indictment were fictional and/or unfounded. He thinks that even those trials were *konceptciós*, which were based on non-moral laws or decrees or in which the rules of criminal procedure were hurt.⁶ He also adds that trials and verdicts in both periods were class-orientated: it means that the sentence was different due to not only the crimes 'committed' but also class origin. So, if the accused one was a worker, his punishment was less than someone who was considered to be a 'class-enemy' (e. g. of bourgeois or aristocratic origin).

⁵ Attila Szokolczai, *Az '56-os politikai perek*. Rubicon, 1995/6–7. 42–45.; László Eörsi, *Válogatás 1998 történelmi dokumentumfilmjeiből. Ki volt Tóth Ilona?* In: Évkönyv 1999. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 1999. 363–374.; László Eörsi, *Konceptciós perek?* História 2006/10. 44–46.

⁶ Frigyes Kahler, *Adalékok a forradalom utáni konceptciós perek kérdéséhez. A Brusznai-per tanulságai*. [Conference presentation at the XXth Century Institute, 22 Oct. 2003.] http://www.xxszazadintezet.hu/rendezvenyek/tudomanyos_konferencia_az_1956/kahler_frigyes_adalekok_a_forr.html (accessed 20 Sept. 2012.)

Emotional debates and new (?) interpretation of historical sources

Several historical debates went on between the above mentioned two views (or rather, two schools or even two camps). These quarrels usually indulged in personalities.⁷ Without commenting these disputes it is worth noticing that originally they went on between the two camps. The sharpest controversies arose from the case of Ilona Tóth, one of the female victims of the retaliation, who was executed in June 1957. According to the charges, she and her two male fellow-revolutionaries brutally killed a man in a hospital where Tóth worked as a medical student. She was also the head of a resistance group which issued thousands of political leaflets and also an illegal newspaper after Kádár came to power. László Eörsi, a historian from the 1956 Institute believes that they indeed commit this manslaughter. However, they did it only to protect the revolution as they thought the man was a communist spy – there was a photo of him dressed in the uniform of the hated ÁVH, the political police of the dictatorship. So, Tóth must be considered to be one of the heroes of 1956, says even Eörsi. The other party (including Gábor Jobbágyi, Réka Kiss and Sándor M. Kiss) firmly believes in Tóth's innocence: they claim that the 24-year-old girl was tortured and this is why she confessed to the murder.⁸

More recently, however, the debate restarted between two historians from the first school who were both fellow-workers of the *1956 Institute*. First, Attila Szakolczai accused László Eörsi that he was misinterpreting the historical sources of 1956. As he noted, Eörsi “became a victim of the Kádárist texts”.⁹ As Eörsi read many sources from 1957 and 1958, he took over their interpretation as well, although in a reversed way (i. e. changing the word counter-revolution to revolution etc.), stated Szakolczai. It was not only Eörsi who tried to defend himself but also other historians and even a surviving revolutionary did so – while others supported Szakolczai's opinion.¹⁰ The discussion soon became emotionally motivated again. Its background was the different attitude to the

⁷ Some examples: Gábor Jobbágyi, *Ez itt a vértanúk vére*. Kairosz, Budapest, 1998.; Attila Szakolczai, *Szegény történelem*. Beszélő, 1999/6. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/szegeny-tortenelem>; Gábor Jobbágyi, *Szegény 1956-os Intézet, szegény Szakolczai Attila*. Beszélő, 1999/8. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/szegeny-1956-os-intezet-szegeny-szakolczai-attila>; Eszter Zsófia Tóth, *Két könyv a megtorlásról*. In: Évkönyv 1999. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 1999. 375–383.

⁸ Gábor Jobbágyi, *A néma talp. Tóth Ilona az orvosi kar mártírja*. Püski, Budapest, 2002.; László Eörsi, *Jobbágyi Gábor: A néma talp*. Élet és Irodalom, 2002/38., 24.; László Eörsi, *Tóth Ilona. Valóság és mítosz*. Beszélő, 2002/6. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/02/06/11eorsi.htm>; Réka Kiss – Sándor M. Kiss, *A csalogány elszállt. Tóth Ilona tragikuma*. Kairosz, Budapest, 2007.; Eörsi László, „Ott, akkor és úgy...” Beszélő, 2007/10. 71–80. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/ott-akkor-es-ugy...> (accessed 20 Sept. 2012.)

⁹ Attila Szakolczai, *Népköztársaság tér*, 2007. Élet és Irodalom, 2007/20. A more detailed critical study under the same title is also available: http://www.rev.hu/rev/htdocs/hu/tanulmanyok/1956/nepkoztarsasagter_sza.pdf (Accessed 20 Sept. 2012.)

¹⁰ László Eörsi, *Köztársaság tér 1956–2007*. Élet és Irodalom, 2007/22. http://www.es.hu/eorsi_laszlo;koztarsasag_ter_1956-2007;2007-06-03.html; Éva Ständeisky, *Így azért ne!* Élet és Irodalom, 2007/22. http://www.es.hu/standeisky_eva;igy_azert_ne;2007-06-03.html; Radnai György, *A szemtanú jogai*. Élet és Irodalom, 2007/26. [http://www.es.hu/kereses/szerzo/Radnai György](http://www.es.hu/kereses/szerzo/Radnai%20Gyorgy); Tibor Takács, *A források tere*. Élet és Irodalom, 2007/24. http://www.es.hu/takacs_tibor;a_forrasok_tere;2007-06-17.html

sources. Eörsi believes that the investigation methods of the Kádár regime changed significantly comparing to the pre-1956 *konceptió*s trials and therefore retaliatory sources tell us mainly the truth – Szakolczai states that they are completely false and/or manipulated, so one has to be much more critical to them.

To demonstrate his truth, Szakolczai chose a single trial and investigated it meticulously. It is the case of another famous (or even infamous) female victim of the retaliation, Piroška Jankó (who was not sentenced to death, contrary to Ilona Tóth). According to her verdict, she killed an officer on 30 October 1956 with a knife. There were rumours that she (or the mob around her) even tore out the heart of the colonel. (This story was so fabulous that it was left out even from the charges.) Szakolczai examined the surviving sources very carefully. His method is similar to Frigyes Kahler, Réka Kiss and Sándor M. Kiss:¹¹ instead of a brief survey of a great bulk of sources (which seems to be Eörsi's method as he was able to produce a whole new book on different rebel groups in almost every year reading the minutes of the investigations and court files of several trials¹²), he made a very detailed search, e. g. comparing the confessions of witnesses and the defendant and even those told by the same person but at another time. Doing so, he found a lot of antagonisms and falsifications. The minutes were not written word by word, it was always the investigator who wrote a 'summary' of what he was told (or, more precisely, of what he expected or hoped he was told). Even from these distorted texts it is obvious that the investigators manipulated the witnesses and Jankó: not only distorting their words but also giving the words into their mouths. As Szakolczai tried to find out the truth, he had to work like solving a puzzle – what is more, there were several wrong or false piece among them. There were a lot of problems during the investigation. First, Jankó was accused of killing János Asztalos, in which she pleaded guilty. Soon it became obvious that Asztalos was not stabbed and Jankó readily agreed that her victim was another colonel named József Papp. Although he was really stabbed, he was also shot and his death was due to these shots. Contrary to this fact, Jankó was still charged with murder. However, Szakolczai even believes that she did not stab the dead colonel and was therefore completely innocent.¹³

Eörsi responded quickly, claiming that Jankó did stab the (living or already dead) colonel, so she killed or at least wanted to kill him. According to Eörsi, neither this, nor the most of the post-1956 trials were *konceptió*s. The authorities wanted to find out the truth (with some minor exceptions), states Eörsi.¹⁴ In his response, Szakolczai writes that Eörsi does not care about the details: he thinks that Papp could have been alive when

¹¹ See Frigyes Kahler, *A Brusznai-per. Emberi sorsok a politikai megtorlás idején*. Kairosz, [Budapest], [1998]. Kiss – M. Kiss, op. cit.

¹² Eörsi's most important books are the following: *Ferencváros 1956. A kerület fegyveres csoportjai*. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 1997.; *Corvinisták 1956. A VIII. kerület fegyveres csoportjai*. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 2001.; *Mítoszok helyett – 1956*. Noran, Budapest, 2003.; *Széna tériek 1956*. 1956-os Intézet–Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest, 2004.; *Köztársaság tér 1956*. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 2006.; *Angyalföld 1956. Emberek, sorsok, emlékek*. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 2006. (with co-authors); *A „Baross-köztársaság”. A VII. kerületi felkelőcsoportok*, L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2011.

¹³ Attila Szakolczai, *Szegény Jankó Piroška*. In: Évkönyv 2008. 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 2008. 279–374.

¹⁴ László Eörsi, *Konceptió és mítoszrombolás*. Beszélő, 2010/1. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/konceptios-mitoszrombolas> (accessed 23 Sept. 2012.)

Jankó could have possibly stabbed him, although he was shot by several bullets (which went through his brain and also his heart). He also underlines that “(until now) I have never called the post-1956 retaliatory proceedings *konceptió*s trials” but now he thinks that “there were *konceptió*s trials after 1956 but most proceedings were preconceptual”.¹⁵ In short, Szakolczai had changed his mind and accepted the view that many trials after 1956 were constructed, i. e. *konceptió*s. So he joined to the opinion of those whom he criticized some years before. Eörsi was glad to cite Szakolczai’s earlier statements on his homepage (with a malicious remark)¹⁶ – but I think if someone changes his opinion due to facts which he had not known previously is not a shame.

Szakolczai wrote a remark also on the case of Ilona Tóth. As he pointed out: “I have never taken a commitment on this issue previously with such clarity”, but after he had read the book of Réka Kiss and Sándor M. Kiss, he was convinced that Tóth was innocent. He even suggests that the two cases are very similar (i. e. they might have the same concept [*konceptió*] behind them): both were young girls, sentenced in the first half of 1957 by the same tribunal; both of them pleaded guilty, were charged by murder committed very similarly: they stabbed a knife to the chest of a tortured, half-naked man who was possibly not alive when they did so etc.¹⁷

I am not a researcher of these retaliatory trials. However, one thing can be understood quite simply from the debate (or, rather, from the quarrel). Both historians are partly right but neither wants to understand the other point of view. Both of them misinterpret one another. Nevertheless, Szakolczai’s arguments seem to be more convincing. It seems that historians must do a closer analysis and a more detailed research. It is certain that we will never know the whole truth but I agree with Szakolczai: researchers have to try to get rid of the Kádárist framework of interpretation. But in a sense Eörsi is right, too: retaliatory trials do differ from the classic *konceptió*s trials. Altogether, these differences seem to be smaller than we thought previously.

¹⁵ Attila Szakolczai, *Piroska és farkasai*. Beszélő, 2010/2–3. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/piroska-es-farkasai> (accessed 23 Sept. 2012.)

¹⁶ László Eörsi: *Konceptió*s mítoszrombolás III. <http://www.eorsilaszo.hu/eorsilaszo.hu/el/cikkek/elegyes/326.doc> (accessed 23 Sept. 2012). The debate went on for a while even in Beszélő, but it became again highly emotional and indulged in personalities (including both parties).

¹⁷ Attila Szakolczai, *Itt a mítosz, hol a mítosz?!* Beszélő, 2010/4. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/itt-a-mitosz-hol-a-mitosz> (accessed 23 Sept. 2012.)