

GLOBALIZING THE STUDENT REBELLION IN THE LONG '68

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1968 in the Hungarian Press

Attila Nóbik

1. Introduction

Hungary, like many other Eastern European countries, hasn't been in the limelight of western research on the history of international relations during the Cold War period. The nations of the Soviet bloc are sometimes seen as small satellite states of the Soviet Union. Hence, not only the internal affairs and the differences of these states are neglected, but the distinctive approaches they might have had toward international relations.

This unconcern or even hostility toward Eastern European national histories is not exclusive to general history, though. As Iveta Kestere explained: «In the early 1990s, after liberation from Soviet dictatorship, the job of historians was the creation of national narratives for the purpose of differentiating the history of individual nations from that of the anonymous masses of socialist society» (Kestere, 2016, p. 109). But post-soviet historians' renewed interests in the nation and national history hasn't been well-received by their western peers. «International, transnational, and global history was in vogue, and national identity was only associated with Europe's negative historic experiences. In addition, the national perspective can always be accused of narrow-mindedness, in contrast to the international perspective that, by definition, has a broader angle» (Kestere, 2016, pp. 109-110).

Therefore my research, which focuses on a previously neglected topic, is an attempt to contribute to international research from a uniquely Hungarian perspective.

I have analyzed how the events of 1968, notably the French riots were represented in the contemporary Hungarian Press. I have examined the country's three most important political newspapers Népszabadság (People's Freedom), Népszava (People's Voice), Magyar Nemzet (Hungarian Nation), and two regional newspapers Délmagyarország (Southern Hungary), Szolnok Megyei Néplap (Szolnok County People's Journal). I have focused on the political press, as another type of journals (e.g. cultural, juvenile) didn't cover the events. These journals have been digitized and are accessible for research. I have searched in the digital archives with keywords related to the French riots (e.g. France, Paris, Sorbonne, Quartier Latin, Cohn-Bendit, etc.) and I have also read through the volumes of 1968.

2. Hungary and the Hungarian press in 1968

Understanding the reception of the 1968 French events in the Hungarian Press requires a brief explanation of Hungarian internal and international affairs and the situation of the Hungarian political press.

1968 was a tumultuous year not only for Western Europe but also for Hungary. At the beginning of the year, following long-lasting debates and preparation the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party introduced a «New Economic Mechanism». As a part of the consolidation process that followed the 1956 Revolution from the early 1960s, the reform, which was based on neoliberal economic theories, made some cautious steps toward the liberalization of the economy.

Ultimately, the "New Economic Mechanism" that came into force on January 1st, 1968 - the NEM - ushered in three essential changes. It reduced the role of central planning in production and investment, thereby increasing the autonomy of enterprises, some of them being granted foreign trade rights; it introduced distinctions between consumer goods that were sold at centrally fixed prices, at ceiling ("maximal") prices and at market-driven prices; and finally it gave much more scope than previously for pay and incomes to be linked to performance (Romsics, 2007, p. 75).

The «New Economic Mechanism» was a culmination of several (e.g. agricultural) reforms that started in the early 1960s. These reforms affected not only the political sphere and the economy but also the higher education. The 1960s was a period of quick and significant expansion of the Hungarian higher education. From 1960 to 1965 the number of universities and colleges increased from 43 to 92. Also, the Numerus Clausus rules were annulled in higher education, therefore applicants' individual ability and motivation became more important admission requirements than class background (Romsics, 2010).

Although international affairs (e.g. the failure of the Prague Spring) and the internal conservative communist opposition prevented the full success of the reforms, Hungary had relatively higher living standards and a more liberal economy and public life compared to other communist regimes.

The political press, however, didn't enjoy this liberalization. In only a few months following the revolution, the Kádár regime eliminated the free press and the resistance by the journalists. The media once again became the tool of central propaganda. In our period Hungary had three daily newspaper. The *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom) was the journal of the Party. The Association of Unions published *Népszava* (People's Voice) while the Patriotic People's Front published *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) (Horváth 2013).

«The central tool of media control was the individual responsibility of the carefully selected editors-in-chiefs and editors, who regularly met with the Department for Agitation and Propaganda and the Information Bureau» (Sonnenvend, 2013, p. 341).

3. 1968 in the Hungarian Press

The Hungarian press, even the local one, covered the international affairs in length. The national political journals had their global sections, and the *Népszabadság* had its correspondents in major European and American capitals. Although all critical events got covered, the Vietnam war, the Paris peace negotiations and the Eastern European, especially the Czechoslovakian events dominated international new sections.

Initially, in my research, I have studied not only the political but also cultural, juvenile journals. These, however, didn't cover the French events. As a preliminary result of the research, I could conclude that the Hungarian press treated the events as political ones were suitable for the adult audience only.

Three stages of the reception could be identified. Coverages started in early May, and focused on the «university unrests». Short news informed the readers of the occupation of universities and the police attacks against the students. First reports arranged the events around the iconic places of Sorbonne and the Quartier Latin. While the coverage on the police brutality was deprecating, the reporters were distant for the students too.

A coverage in *Népszabadság* on 15th May about the dispute between the students and the French government summarized the demands of the students as the abolition of university examinations, the reform of the present society, cultural revolution, taking up arms to change the system, sexual freedom and university autonomy. The correspondent added that

the demands are anarchic. He even highlighted, that Professor Kastler, a Nobel Prize winner, who had supported the students' claims, warned them that they shouldn't compromise their future and the future of the Sorbonne by demanding the examinations.

A report in the *Magyar Nemzet* on 8th of May noted that many protesting girls were wearing miniskirts. The goal of this seemingly irrelevant detail was to discredit the protesters further. It tried to recall the harsh negative associations that the Hungarian press spread about the miniskirts in the previous years.

Many of the reports stressed that the student rebellions are led by a small but loud minority. One of the stories even labelled these students as «fascists, anarchists, Trotskyists and Maoists».

The focus of the Hungarian press shifted from the student riots to the workers' national strikes by the end of May. Therefore, Hungarian readers couldn't gather a detailed knowledge of the French student movements. The students were usually depicted as violent actors of the events. The articles portrayed Cohn-Bendit and other leaders of the rebellions as anarchists and anti-communist.

I'll argue later that the main reason behind this type of coverage was the collective memory of the 1956 revolution, although the press made no direct connection between the French events and the revolution.

The second stage of the reception focused on the national strikes and the activities of the French Communist Party. In the third stage of the reception of the 1968 events, the Hungarian press focused on the French parliamentary election. During the campaign, the analyzed journals emphasized that the French Communist Party, along with its allies, had the chance of winning the election. The results that the Communist Party lost many of its seats to de Gaulle's governing party came as a shock to the Press. Some reports even blamed the unfair election system. After the election, though, the Hungarian press lost its interests in the French internal affairs quickly.

We must mention that the press didn't give a detailed analysis of the events. Only one article from 1968 made a considerable effort to explain the reasons for the riots and the strikes. In a brief editorial of the *Népszabadság*, during the strikes, an author analyzed the events. He stated *that the* «university events were merely a spark: the accumulated flammable substances would have been ignited anyway. It was not the spark that determined the flame, but the multitude of unresolved problems that accumulated in the society, which had come to the edge of the inflammation» (Szabó, 1968, p. 1). The editorial employs a traditional anti-capitalist, class-war explanation. «The French worker fights not only for

fairer wages but also for rights: for democracy, which works for them and not against them. (...) It [the strike - A.N.] is about the typical problems of capitalism; the capitalist system, that can create technical miracles and give goods, but inevitably produces its own social contradictions, and it has been unsuccessful in solving them so far. (...) The intensity and the momentum of their struggle evoke the most beautiful traditions of the fighting international working class» (Szabó, 1968, p. 1.).

The immediate explanation fits in the contemporary reception of the events. The rhetoric is strongly anticapitalist and focuses on the role of the workers. Although in my research I've focused on the contemporary reception of 1968, it is worth mentioning that we could find a more nuanced explanation as early as the February of 1969. The Paris correspondent of *Népszabadság* analyzed, in a lengthy article, the «Waterloo of the Napoleonic University». He described the social and economical roots of the student-movement and demands of the students in details and in a sympathetic tone. He condemned the archaic structure of the university, the neglect of the challenges of the new «intellectronic» economy and the wrongful policies of the Gaullist political elite. His interpretation gave a more realistic description of the events (Kovács, 1969).

4. Conclusions

As we could see above, the French riots of 1968 were not amongst the leading events that the Hungarian political press covered. The «university unrests» weren't covered in much detail and hadn't got a positive coverage. Besides the reasons mentioned above, we might find three main interrelated explanations for this phenomenon.

By the 1960s the principle of peaceful coexistence became the official foreign policy of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries. Interpretation of the principle changed during the decades, and the relations of the capitalist and socialist nations might have been turbulent from time to time, but the Soviet Union (at least officially) rejected the «violent export» of communism.

As the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev stated in 1959:

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union at its Twentieth Congress made it perfectly clear and obvious that the allegations that the Soviet Union intends to overthrow capitalism in other countries by means of «exporting» revolution are absolutely unfounded. I cannot refrain from reminding you of my words at the Twentieth Congress: "It goes without saying that among us Communists there are no adherents of capitalism. But this does not mean that we have interfered or plan to interfere in the internal affairs of countries where capitalism still exists. Romain Rolland was right when he said that "freedom is not brought in from abroad in

baggage trains like Bourbons". It is ridiculous to think that revolutions are made to order (Khrushchev, 1959, p. 5).

According to this principle, the Hungarian press supported not the efforts of the students, but those of the French Communist Party, the largest opposition party in France. The strikes and the elections were considered as legitimate tools of overthrowing the French government. According to the press, the French Communist Party had the real chance of winning the elections. After the unsuccessful election and with the intensification of the Czechoslovakian events the Hungarian political press lost its interest in the French affairs.

Another reason behind the cold reception of the 1968 French riots was one of the inherent contradictions of the communist/socialist states. Communist/socialist regimes were based on revolutionary ideology. The communism gained power in Russia as a result of a revolution (and a civil war). The communist propaganda praised the icons of the revolution and the fight for the power or even the «fight for the peace». The militant propaganda might efface the truly conservative nature of the regimes. Despite their «revolutionary roots», the primary interests of regimes was the reservation of the status quo. Hence, revolutionary acts, even abroad, often were seen as suspicious.

Overall, the most important reason behind the reserve toward the «university unrests» must have been the collective memory of the 1956 revolution. Although the political consolidation (e.g. general amnesty in 1963) and the slow liberalization of public sphere had advanced by the end of the 1960s, one of the most important cornerstones of the Kádár regime remained the rejection of the 1956 revolution. Albeit János Kádár came into the power as a Soviet puppet, he quickly realized that he couldn't continue his predecessors' social, agricultural and economic policies. Following a short period of terror, he built his regime on an unsaid compromise between the society and the state. In exchange for the acceptance of the regime and the rejection of the violent act of the «counterrevolution», the regime promised more personal freedom, better living conditions and higher quality of life for the Hungarians.

The press, as I mentioned above, didn't make a direct connection between the French riots and the Hungarian revolution. Instead, building on the collective memory of the revolution, they created an interpretation that was clearly understandable for readers.

In her groundbreaking research, Julia Sonnevend (2013) analyzed the representation of the 1956 «counterrevolution» in the Hungarian press. Building on the theory of collective memory, she identified four periods of the construction of the representation in the Népszabadság. The image

of the «counterrevolution» had its iconic objects, people and places. Sonnevend highlights the differences between the contemporary local and western interpretation of the revolution.

Table 1. The local frame of the counterrevolution and the Western frame of the revolution (Sonnevend, 2013, p. 347).

	Counterrevolution	Revolution
Participants	Criminals and fascists	Innocent youth
Organization	Preplanned	Spontaneous
Organizers	Initiated and supported by international forces	Local
Method/ tactic	Dominated by mob violence, in particular, lynching	Non-violent revolutionary process with occasional armed fighting

She notes though that the Népszabadság differentiated amongst the participants. «On the 10th anniversary [1966 - A.N.] the leading article entitled »One Decade« was relatively forgiving toward the counterrevolutionaries, mentioning that at the time some participants likely did not completely realize what they were participating in». This rhetoric is similar to that used in the case of the 1968 events. Labelling the rioting students as fascists, anarchists, anti-communists, Trotskyists or Maoists, the press evoked the interpretations attached to the 1956 revolution.

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