A Short History of the Hungarian Communist Party

Miklós Molnár

ROUTLEDGE

A Short History of the Hungarian Communist Party

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

A Short History of the Hungarian Communist Party

Miklós Molnár

In spite of its small size, the Hungarian Communist party (HCP), founded in the fall of 1918, has played an important role both in Hungary's national history and in the international communist movement. Hungary, which was the only soviet republic other than the ephemeral Bavarian soviet republic to exist outside the USSR, lasted five months during the critical period of the Paris Peace Conference. The "veterans" of the Hungarian soviet republic, like Béla Kun, Georg Lukács, and Eugen Varga, later held important posts in the Comintern and in the international Communist press. In the Stalinist era, the HCP distinguished itself by excessive zeal in the application of "integral Stalinism" in foreign policy (e.g., anti-Titoism), the economy, and political life (e.g., the Rajk and Kádár trials). However, the 1956 revolution was engineered by the revisionist communist intelligentsia and by such revisionist party leaders as Imre Nagy. Finally, in spite of its repressive role after the revolution, in the 1970s under János Kádár the HCP introduced a new system of "liberalism" and economic reform.

This volume was written on the basis of official party publications, memoirs, the contemporary press, and research conducted in Hungarian, Austrian, French, and Italian archives.

Miklós Molnár is professor of the history of international relations and of contemporary history at the Graduate Institute of International Studies (GIIS), Geneva, and at Lausanne University. Dr. Molnár studied in Budapest, where he was editor-in-chief of *Iradalmi Ujsag,* and received his Ph.D. from the GIIS. Among his books are *Le Déclin de la Première Internationale* and *A History of the Hungarian Revolution.*

A Short History of the Hungarian Communist Party

Miklós Molnár

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1978 by Westview Press, Inc.

Published 2019 by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Number: 77-27898

ISBN 13: 978-0-367-28725-2 (hbk)

Contents

1. History

Origins

There is no authentic, accessible historical evidence that allows us to establish precisely the dates, places, and circumstances of the foundation of the Hungarian Communist party (HCP).[1] According to a vast collection of documents published in 1956 by the Institute for Party History, such evidence was not available at that time.[2] Subsequent publications do not fill this gap either. Therefore, various works either differ about the dates and places of the first, founding meeting of the HCP, or they avoid providing detailed information about it. This is particularly true of the *Munkásmozgalomtörténeti Lexikon* [Historical dictionary of the workers' movement] (1972),[3] as well as of a recent collective historical study (1968) dedicated to the history of the HCP's organization.[4]

In any case, two separate initiatives lie at the origin of the HCP: one taken by socialist groups, both revolutionary and leftist, in Hungary, the other by Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia who had adhered to the revolution and the Bolshevik party. As early as October 1918, the socialist groups in Hungary were considering the formation of either a communist circle (Karl Marx Circle or Ervin Szabó Circle) or a revolutionary socialist party separate from the Social Democratic party (SDP). On November 15, 1918, with the foundation of

this party in mind, they organized a meeting in a printer's shop at 12 József Square.[5] According to available sources, however, the party was not as yet founded on this date. The 1956 collection of documents gives November 20 as the date of its foundation. The Hungarian historian György Milei, a specialist on this question, has enumerated all the accessible sources and dates mentioned therein—November 17, 21, 22, 24, and 28. After comparing the evidence, he concluded that the most likely date is November 24 and that the most likely location is a private apartment on Városmajor Street in a residential neighborhood on the right bank of the Danube.[6] It was there, in fact, that Béla Kun and his friends, having arrived from Moscow on November 19, met with their comrades of the socialist left in order to found the Hungarian Communist party. However, this does not rule out the possibility that such an initiative had been taken even before their arrival, probably by János Hirossik.

Be that as it may, the communists who came from Russia played a major role in the actual establishment of the HCP, if only by reason of the prestige that surrounded the Russian Bolshevik party, its leader Lenin, and its principles of revolutionary organization, to which the group from Russia laid claim.

The origin of this group, which was led by Béla Kun, goes back to 1917. In several prison camps in Russia, soldiers supported the revolution, especially in Siberia. In Omsk, the Hungarian Károly Ligeti established and presided over the International Socialist (later Communist) Party of Prisoners of War. Still in Omsk, Ligeti published the Hungarian newspaper *Forradalom* [Revolution]. In the meantime, several other communist groups were formed, notably in Tomsk, Ivanovo, Krasnoiarsk, Tver, and Petrograd. On March 24, 1918, a central organization was founded in Moscow—it united the communist prisoners under the name of Hungarian Group of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Russia. This group published the biweekly *Szociális Forradalom* [Social

revolution] as well as a number of propaganda pamphlets, written chiefly by Béla Kun, Tibor Szamuely, and Károly Vántus. It belonged to the International Federation of Foreign Groups of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Russia, founded in May under the chairmanship of Kun, and it had its headquarters at the Hotel Dresden in Moscow. At the end of 1918, it had about 90 members in Moscow and 150-170 in several other cities and fighting units of the Red Army. According to another version, the group had 350-370 members: among others, 130 in Russia, 25 in the Ukraine, and about 300 returnees in Hungary. We shall come back to these 300.[7]

It is important to note that this federation, which united the Hungarian, Rumanian, Yugoslav, Czechoslovak, and German groups (to which were soon added the Finnish, French, Bulgarian, and Anglo-American groups), operated under the direction of the Central Committee of the Communist party (Bolshevik) through the intermediary of its Hungarian, Rumanian, and other sections created within the Central Committee in March 1918. The Federation of Foreign Groups was to enroll all foreigners who were members of the Bolshevik party and to "unite them in the Third International."[8] In addition, it was directly responsible for propaganda and organization among all prisoners of war as well as for the troops who fought against the Czechoslovak Legion.[9] Lastly, it had under its direction the German and Austro-Hungarian councils of prisoners of war, which had come into being in November 1918, after the collapse of the Reich and the Dual Monarchy. As a result, the Hungarian group found itself part of a wide network, whose objectives were: (1) the organization of combat units for the Russian revolution; (2) propaganda and organizational work with a view toward revolutions in Germany and in the former Austria-Hungary; and (3) the organization of embryonic communist parties to be joined with the Third International, which itself was in the process of formation. All these activi-

ties fell under the direction of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party, where Béla Kun, according to many indications, enjoyed a rather exceptional role and prestige. This situation undoubtedly explains the particularly close relationship between, on the one hand, the leading circles in Moscow, including Lenin himself, and, on the other hand, the future Soviet Republic of Hungary. Likewise, it sheds light on the role played by the group of Hungarian émigrés in Moscow after the collapse of the dictatorship in Hungary.

Established then on March 24, 1918, the Hungarian Group of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Russia, in addition to its propaganda and organizational work, formed an "agitator school," which trained 102 "agitator-propagandists" in five special courses. This number does not include those who received their training in Omsk from Ligeti's group and probably some others as well. According to the Hungarian historian Dr. Tibor Szamuely, 745 Hungarian prisoners attended the different agitator schools. According to a report of the Hungarian Group, 20 graduates from the Moscow school went to Hungary in October 1918, and 80 more in November 1918, in addition to "100-120 regular soldiers of the party."[10]

In the meantime, several meetings took place in Russia for the purpose of forming the Hungarian Communist party. Already on July 10, 1918, it had been decided to convene those Hungarian communists of Russia who were ready to go to Hungary in order to establish the party. At another meeting, held on August 25, Tibor Szamuely reported on his discussion with Lenin, who had inquired about the Hungarian Social Democratic party to learn whether cooperation between communists and social democrats would be possible. On October 25, Kun laid down the principles that were to preside over the formation of a Hungarian Communist party of the Bolshevik type. Finally, on November 4, the group of Austro-Hungarian communists of the Bolshevik party founded, still at the Hotel Dresden,

the Communist party of Hungary, the "Hungarian Section of the International Communist Party." They announced their intention to follow the direction of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party until the Third International was established. The new party ordered its members to return to Hungary with the least possible delay. It elected a Provisional Central Committee, which was composed of Károly Vántus, Béla Kun, Ernö Pór, Hariton Beszkarid, Emil Bozdogh, Mátyás Kovács, Mátyás Krisják, Iván Matuzovits, and Ferenc Drobnik.[11]

The following day, Kun and several other members of the group set out for Hungary, where they arrived by mid-November. According to the report of the Hungarian Communist Group mentioned above, other "agitators," sent from Moscow as early as October, were already there. Still others arrived later, either from Russia or from other countries. For example, Tibor Szamuely had been sent on a mission to Switzerland and to the Spartacus League in Berlin and had stayed there until January 1919. Under these circumstances it is difficult to state accurately the total number of communists who came from Russia or to list the leading members who participated in the foundation of the CP in Hungary. For the former, the report of the Communist Group of Moscow seems to be the only available source. But it is not known whether the hundred "agitators" mentioned in the December report include the group of militants dispatched to Budapest in mid-November and after. Nevertheless, the relatively limited number of Hungarian communists organized in the group at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 leads one to believe that no more than 250-300 agents arrived in Hungary—the more so since a nucleus stayed in Russia in order to take care of former Hungarian prisoners (almost half a million), both those who were part of the Red Army and those who were not. This nucleus grew constantly, if one judges by the 3,400 members registered at the Central Office of the seventy-six Hungarian communist groups in Russia.

These thousands of communists, who did not participate in party activities during the existence of the Republic of the Councils of Hungary, were either sent on a clandestine mission to Hungary in the second half of 1920 and in 1921, or else settled in Russia.

According to the most recent work on the question, the first Central Committee (elected by the HCP's founding meeting [or meetings] included the following members of the Moscow group: Béla Kun, Ferenc Jancsik, Ernö Pór, József Rabinovics, Ernö Seidler, Károly Vántus, as well as Tibor Szamuely after his return.[12] Hence, of the nine members of the Provisional Central Committee established in Moscow on November 4, one finds again three: Kun, Pór, and Seidler.

According to the same work, the other two constituent groups were represented as follows: Béla Vágó, Ede Chlepko, Rezsö Fiedler, János Hirossik, Jenö László, László Rudas, and Béla Szántó of the leftist social democrats who had broken away from their former party; and finally, Otto Korvin and József Mikulin of the Revolutionary Socialists.

According to other works, other leaders were Ferenc Münnich, Frigyes Karikás, Mátyás Rákosi, Sándor Kellner, and Gyula Alpári—all of whom, however, were not among the original "founders." Certain leftist leaders of the Republic of the Councils and future communists such as Jenö Varga, Jenö Landler, and others still remained members of the Social Democratic party.

The Moscow group, even if it played a very important role in organizing the new party, would undoubtedly not have been able to win acceptance for communist principles without the help of the other two constituent groups. Of these, the Revolutionary Socialists actually came from two main sources. One was the left wing of the Galileo Circle, which as early as 1908 had united the intelligentsia and radical student groups. Karl Polányi, who received international recognition for his writings composed in exile in

Germany, in England after 1933, and finally in the United States, was among the leaders of this intellectual movement, along with the great poet Endre Ady and many future communists, such as Otto Korvin and Imre Sallai. Also very close to the Galileo Circle was another group centered around Ervin Szabó, which likewise joined the revolutionary socialist movement. More than radical, Ervin Szabó and his followers were anarcho-syndicalists. It was from this position that Szábo, since the early years of the century, had been criticizing German as well as Hungarian social democracy. Theorist and sociologist, Szabó, through his work and his personality, left his mark not only on his group but on a great part of the left intelligentsia. An antimilitarist, Szabó pursued his revolutionary propaganda against the war, especially from 1917. After his death in September 1918, several of his followers drifted toward communism, particularly József Révai, in addition to those already mentioned. Of the left social democrats who joined the HCP from the very first, János Hirossik seems to have played the most important political role. Close to Gyula Alpári, he was, from 1910, one of the leaders of the left opposition within his party, which eventually expelled him in 1912. The routes the others took were often different, but their profound motivation was the same, namely, dissatisfaction with the Social Democratic party, which they regarded as becoming more and more bourgeois and revisionist, as well as with the Second International, paralyzed by the fact that its more important parties had approved the war effort in their respective countries and had even entered the governments of the Union Sacrée. The October revolution in Russia and the revolutionary, antimilitary, and internationalist politics of the Bolsheviks could only deepen the divergences between those leftist elements and the established socialist parties.

Certainly, all these leftist groups together were only an extremely small minority of the socialist elite, or even of the radical elite. According to Vilmos Böhm, one of the social

democratic leaders, they represented only a handful of persons who had long been "dissatisfied for personal reasons" and who had left the party or had been expelled.[13] Whatever their personal reasons, however, there were also profound political and ideological factors and, the decisive element, the radicalizing effect of the situation itself. Radicalization had been started by the war, widened by the revolution in Russia, and it gained momentum in dramatic fashion after the military defeat, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian army, and the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy. If the great and prestigious Social Democratic party was itself driven to merge in March 1919 with the HCP, which had been founded hardly four months before, it was because the political crisis in the country had become more and more serious.

It was in this crisis that the HCP was founded and quickly rose to power. This is not the place to analyze this crisis itself; our object is merely to point out the elements that may throw light on the rise of the HCP.

The military collapse produced in Hungary not only an economic emergency, but also a serious political crisis. Two parties of the democratic opposition, the Independence party headed by Count Mihály Károlyi and the National Radical Bourgeois party, together with the Social Democratic party decided on October 15, 1918, to form a Hungarian National Council. Three days later, the troubles that had been endemic for more than a month took on revolutionary proportions. First, there was a mass demonstration in Budapest on the twenty-eighth; then, on the evening of the thirtieth, revolution broke out. The Soldiers' Council, created the day before, arrested the commanding general of Budapest, but even without this, no unit would have obeyed him any longer. The army was in complete disarray; what remained of it placed itself at the disposal of the National Council, offering it control over the capital on the following day.

Count Károlyi formed a coalition government under the aegis of the National Council. But immediately popular

unrest, particularly among the workers, resumed in order to push the government to proclaim the republic. Finally, on November 13, King Charles of Habsburg signed, in pencil, a document surrendering power, and on the sixteenth, in front of a crowd estimated at 200,000 people, Count Károlyi announced the advent of the first Hungarian republic.[14]

Contrary to what numerous historical works erroneously affirm, no such decision had ever been taken during the Hungarian Revolution and the War of Independence of 1848-1849. Kossuth contented himself with proclaiming the dethronement of the Habsburgs, but he did not establish a republic. Nevertheless, the Hungarian Revolution of October-November 1918 was a republican-democratic movement in the spirit of '48 both in style and in substance. This is also true on the political and economic levels. The numerous radical measures that were taken during the five months of the Károlyi administration (which was reorganized several times, particularly in consideration of Károlyi's election to the presidency of the Republic) tended to modernize and democratize the country. For some it was not enough, for others it was far too much. In any case, the heterogeneous composition of the forces in power did not allow the radical transformation of agrarian structures, thus leaving in suspense for a quarter of a century the revendication of the poor peasantry, which made up half the population.

Still, the fact remains that the Democratic Republic did not fail because of domestic problems. It failed because of the international balance of power. Confronted with the nationality movement, which had become the pivotal issue in the reorganization of Central Europe and the Balkans, placed in a difficult position toward the powers of the Entente—especially France—Count Károlyi failed in his foreign policy. Unable to obtain concessions from the great powers, harassed by Czechoslovakia and Rumania (which were eager above all to weaken Hungary), Károlyi saw himself driven into a choice worthy of Corneille: to give in or to resign. After having signed