

Hungarian Women's Activism in the Wake of the First World War

From Rights to *Revanche*

Judith Szapor



B L O O M S B U R Y

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Abbreviations

FE	Magyarországi Feministák Egyesülete (Association of Feminists of Hungary)
ICW	International Council of Women
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance
MANSZ	Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége (National Alliance of Hungarian Women)
MNE	Magyar Nőtisztviselők Egyesülete (Hungarian Association of Women Clerks)
MNOSZ	Magyarországi Nőegyesületek Országos Szövetsége (National Alliance of Women's Associations of Hungary)
MSZDP	Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt (Social Democratic Party of Hungary)
OL	Országos Levéltár (National Archives of Hungary)
PTIL	Politikatörténeti és Szakszervezeti Levéltár (Archives of Political History and the Trade Unions)
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Timeline

- March 1848–October 1849:* Liberal revolution and war of independence with Austria, defeated with the help of imperial Russia, followed by absolutist rule
- 1867:* Compromise establishes Dual or Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a personal union of Austria and Hungary, with joint foreign affairs and defence
- 1890:* Founding of Social Democratic Party of Hungary
- 1894–1895:* Laws regulating church–state relations: civil marriage, state registration of births and deaths, freedom of religion, including acceptance of Jewish religion
- 1896:* Celebrations of Hungary's Millennium
- December 1904:* Founding of Association of Feminists of Hungary
- 1905–1906:* Political crisis, introduction of universal manhood suffrage in Austria
- 1908:* First issue of *Nyugat* (West), the modernist literary magazine appears
- 1910:* Last prewar parliamentary elections, with 6.4 per cent of the population eligible to vote
- 1912:* Yearlong demonstrations for universal suffrage, last feminist suffrage campaign of the prewar period
- May 1913:* 7th Congress of IWSA in Budapest
- July 1914:* Austria-Hungary declares war
- November 1916:* Francis Joseph dies, followed by Charles IV (as king of Hungary)
- December 1917:* Vilmos Vázsonyi submits electoral reform bill that includes women
- June 1918:* Parliament rejects electoral reform bill
- 23 October 1918:* National Council, formed by Károlyi Party, Bourgeois Radical Party, and Social Democratic Party, headed by Mihály Károlyi
- 31 October 1918:* Károlyi appointed Prime Minister, released of his oath to the king
- 3 November 1918:* Austria-Hungary signs armistice with Italy
- 7 November 1918:* Károlyi government begins negotiations of armistice
- 11 November 1918:* Proclamation of Charles IV de facto dissolves the Monarchy
- 12 November 1918:* Declaration of the Republic of Austria
- 16 November 1918:* Hungarian People's Republic announced

23 November 1918: First Decree of the People's Republic: universal suffrage for men over twenty-one and literate women over twenty-four

December 1918: Romanian and Czechoslovak armies occupy Transylvania and Slovakia

January 1919: National Council declares Károlyi President, Dénes Berinkey appointed prime minister; MANSZ founded

February 1919: Arrest of leaders of Hungarian Party of Communists; Károlyi begins distribution of his own estate

20 March 1919: Entente military mission present Hungarian government with new temporary borders, government refuses to accept and resigns

21 March 1919: Arrested leaders of Communist Party and Social Democratic Party agree on merger, Revolutionary Governing Council announces proletarian dictatorship and Republic of Councils

April 1919: Election of Workers and Soldiers' Councils; Red Army takes up fight with Romanian and Czechoslovak armies

1 August 1919: Republic of Councils collapses, government of moderate Social Democrats formed

6 August 1919: Centre-right government formed

August–October 1919: White terror in the countryside; Budapest occupied by Romanian army

16 November 1919: Admiral Miklós Horthy and National Army enters Budapest

January 1920: Parliamentary elections by universal suffrage (men and literate women over twenty-four); Margit Slachta, representing the Christian National Camp elected as sole woman MP

March 1920: Horthy named head of state

4 June 1920: Trianon Peace Treaty signed, depriving Hungary of two-thirds of its prewar territory and nearly 60 per cent of its population, leaving 2.3 million ethnic Hungarians beyond the new borders

September 1920: *numerus clausus* law introduced

March 1922: Electoral decree reduces the number of eligible voters, introduces open elections in most of countryside; Social Democrat Anna Kéthly elected as the sole woman MP

January 1923: First issue of the conservative literary magazine *Napkelet*, edited by Cecile Tormay

Introduction: From Rights to *Revanche*

A sea change – Timeframe and its significance – Scope and scholarship –
Structure and more concepts – Legacy and significance

A sea change

Two events, both preserved in photos and newsreels, frame this study. They provide bookends, as it were, for Hungarian women's activism in the wake of the First World War. The first, a reception for the delegates of the 7th Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), given by the city of Budapest and hosted by the mayor, István Bárczy (1866–1943), took place on 16 June 1913.¹ Six years later saw a reception of a different kind: on 16 November 1919, the leader and members of the right-wing National Association of Hungarian Women (MANSZ) greeted Admiral Miklós Horthy (1868–1957). Hungary's interwar head of state had led his National Army into Budapest that day, reclaiming the city after two failed revolutions.²

Both events will receive more attention in the following chapters – here they serve to mark the sea change that had taken place between them. The objective of this study is, at its most basic level, to reclaim women's activism in the period between these two dates. How did the content, forms of, and space – both in concrete, spatial terms and metaphorically – for women's political activism change during this seismic period? How did political changes affect women's access to the political process – and how, if at all, did women change the rules of the political game itself? Writing women into the aftermath of the First World War inevitably means raising the question, even if it has by now become something a cliché, of whether Hungarian women had a revolution at all. By expanding this study to the entire aftermath period to include both the revolutions and the counter-revolution, both left-wing and right-wing

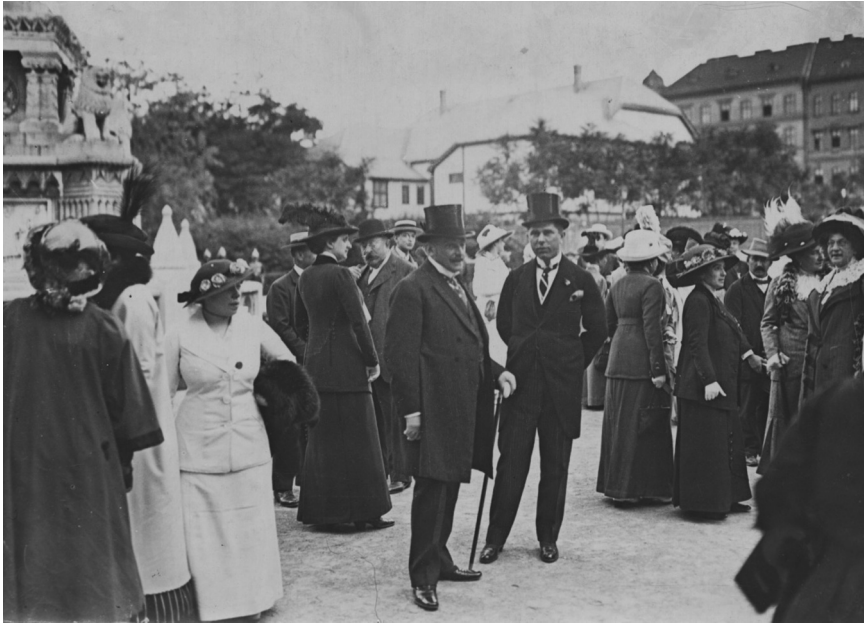


Figure I.1 The reception of the city for delegates of the 1913 Suffrage Congress, with Mayor István Bárczy in the middle and Countess Teleki on the left. Courtesy of the Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



Figure I.2 Cecile Tormay and the women of MANSZ present Horthy with the national flag, 16 November 1919. Courtesy of Filmhíradók Online.

women, we can gauge women's mobilization and re-mobilization in a period that drastically and repeatedly altered the conditions of political activism for women – and men.

While reclaiming little-known, unknown, or forgotten instances and actors of female activism with the help of previously unused or underused sources, this study also attempts to explore the content and broader meaning of their activism. Why were some causes and interests perceived, presented, and represented as marginal and specifically female and others as crucial to the survival of the nation? How would the liberal feminist agenda, including woman's suffrage as a whole, become marginalized and its champions lumped together with Bolsheviks? How would both liberal democrats and communists be stigmatized as conspirators bent on destroying the Hungarian family? The answers to these questions are based on the specific Hungarian context of the war's aftermath. But their broader implications – the interplay of nationalism, left- and right-wing radicalism, anti-Semitism, postwar violence, and women's citizenship in the era of suffrage may, albeit with important distinctions, be applied to other European countries. Another specific characteristic of the Hungarian case in the war's aftermath, the competing models of liberal and radical socialist and their dynamic with right-wing, illiberal women's activism can be extended longitudinally. As I suggest in the Conclusion, it offers clues to the long-term impact of the postwar period's nationalistic, illiberal – and as I argue, highly gendered – ideology which, as I argue in the Conclusion, has penetrated Hungarian society so deeply that its legacy can be still felt almost a century later.

Beyond the specific and respective content and forms of liberal, revolutionary, and counter-revolutionary female activism, this study also speaks to the larger narratives of the interwar period in Hungary. I think especially of the paradigm change from a liberal to an illiberal political framework and dominant ideology that set the tone for the entire interwar period. Not long after its appearance in Hungarian public life in 1904, liberal feminism was identified by contemporaries – supporters and detractors alike – as the embodiment of social modernization. Its detractors and competitors, from traditional conservatives to radical nationalists and anti-Semites, had associated liberal feminists and the liberal model of women's emancipation with the decline of the traditional family.

Moreover, when the feminists diagnosed and offered treatments for symptoms of urbanization and economic and social modernization, especially marked in Budapest (prostitution, venereal diseases, illegitimacy, the problem of domestics, etc.), conservatives did not hesitate to blame the diagnostician for the disease. In their view, feminists and educated, emancipated women in

general embodied the reversal of the natural order. And following the two failed revolutions and the granting of the suffrage they blamed not only feminists but women's emancipation itself for upsetting the political and gender order.

Right-wing, nationalist women activists did an enormous service to the counter-revolutionary regime by advocating an anti-emancipatory agenda, the restoration of the traditional family, and, importantly, by endorsing and legitimizing counter-revolutionary violence. The restoration – and protection from the supposedly destructive influence of liberals, socialists, Bolsheviks, and Jews, all conveniently lumped together – of an imagined and idealized Christian Hungarian family was the cornerstone of their agenda; and crucially, they tied it to the revision of Hungary's Trianon borders as well as a racially defined, vicious anti-Semitism to which they eagerly contributed. The restoration (in contemporary parlance 'revision') of prewar borders went hand in hand with the restoration of social and gender order – at the expense of the liberal values of emancipation, political democracy, and equal citizenship. This combination was key to the counter-revolutionary agenda's potency and wide popular appeal: because the crucial role and expectations placed on women in this programme of national regeneration also lent them a significant level of perceived or real agency, thus assuring their co-operation.

This study also aims to contribute to the historical scholarship of Hungary's interwar period by shedding light on its fundamentally gendered nature. The marginalization of liberal feminists and the liberal model of women's emancipation by the Horthy-regime's official, right-wing nationalistic women's movement went far beyond a conflict between competing women's movements – it represented the regime's first line of attack against the liberal values of modern citizenship and social modernization. This is not to say that others, most of all Communists, Jews, and left-wing intellectuals, were not targeted by equal or greater force – only that liberal feminists were seen as embodying all the enemies: Jewish, left-wing, intellectual, pacifist, and internationalist.

The two events cited previously framed a period that overturned and fundamentally altered every level of political and social life. Within a year after the IWSA Congress, the First World War started – and when it ended, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was defeated and dissolved. Exactly a year before the entry of Admiral Horthy into Budapest in November 1919 (and, as we will see, the date is no coincidence) the new, independent Hungary that emerged from the ruins of the Dual Monarchy was declared a People's Republic by the head of the liberal revolutionary government, Count Mihály Károlyi (1875–1955). The dissolution of the Dual Monarchy was by then accomplished, and the end of multi-ethnic Hungary was a fait accompli – although the Treaty of Trianon with its devastating conditions

was not signed until June 1920. This first, liberal revolution was followed by a Bolshevik-type second that in turn was overthrown; and by the time Horthy rode into the capital in November 1919, counter-revolutionary forces were in full charge of the country and the government. The changes in governments were accompanied by changes in the form of state: The People's Republic, itself turned into the Republic of Councils, was turned back into, nominally, the Kingdom of Hungary, a country without a monarch but with Horthy as regent.

The change in terms of political systems was no less fundamental. Prewar Hungary was a liberal parliamentary democracy – in addition to an intricate arrangement between the two halves of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which governed their common affairs – but with an extremely limited suffrage. From 1906 Austria had universal manhood suffrage, whereas in Hungary approximately 6 per cent of the male population had the vote. The post-revolutionary system was thus more democratic, with universal suffrage for men and women, but also much less liberal and more authoritarian. In the prewar period, the Social Democratic, liberal and peasant parties were kept outside of Parliament; by contrast, all were represented in the interwar period's assembly. Yet in comparison, the prewar political scene was more pluralist, with political freedoms more widely observed, producing a rich associational scene, a cosmopolitan, urban culture, and a small but influential artistic and literary avant-garde, mainly centred in Budapest but with outposts in other cities and towns as well.

During the long decade before the First World War, universal suffrage was the most pressing issue of political life – along with the problem of ethnic minorities – and women's suffrage became the rallying cry of the Feminist Association of Hungary (FE) shortly after its founding in December 1904. This small but dynamic liberal women's rights movement frequently raised a formidable voice in the prewar political arena. It also formed and broke alliances with a wide range of women's organizations, but remained closely associated with an emerging coalition of progressive movements and organizations, the so-called 'second reform generation' or progressive counter-culture. All things considered, as Budapest greeted the representatives of the international suffragist movement, Hungary, saddled with the systemic problems of the Dual Monarchy as well as its own grave political and social problems, could pride itself with producing a promising line of progressive, reformist movements and initiatives, and a lively urban culture.³

By the end of 1919, the *fin de siècle's* thriving political and associational scene was shattered: most members of the prewar pluralist political and cultural scene who had taken part in either or both of the two revolutions had gone into exile or withdrawn from public life. Despite the extended, although gradually

curtailed, political rights during the interwar period, its political system was strictly authoritarian, its liberal and left-wing parties intimidated and reduced in influence, its cultural and educational scene fundamentally conservative, its leftist and avant-garde members pushed to the margins.

When it came to women's movements, the chapter heading and subtitle of this study 'from rights to *revanche*' expresses the changing of the guard from the FE, the defining women's rights movement of the prewar period, to MANSZ, which received official status throughout the interwar period and readily supported – and to a large degree supplied – the government's nationalistic and anti-Semitic agenda. The poles-apart difference between the former – liberal, suffragist, internationalist, and pacifist – movement and the latter – nationalistic, conservative, and anti-Semitic – organization encapsulated the shift between the two eras. It also, in many ways exemplified or foreshadowed the broader political and ideological developments in the interwar period in Hungary and the rest of East-Central and Central Europe.

Timeframe and its significance

While this study sets the period between 1913 and 1922 in which to locate the main trajectories and turning points of women's activism, the timeframe of its core is even shorter, limited to the years between the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1920. The first date marks the beginning of the last, unsuccessful suffrage campaign; the second the elections in which Hungarian women voted for the first time. Dictated by events of Hungarian political and women's history, this chronological framework does to some degree privilege the suffrage while also resonates with milestones of European women's history. Both of these considerations invite some clarifications. The first of these is the connection to the narrative, long-held but largely discarded by the early 1990s, that tied the granting of the suffrage to European women to the First World War.⁴ More recently, comparative studies have complicated this popular but simplistic narrative while pointing out the obvious: that a triumphalist narrative does not hold for large swaths of Western Europe, including France, Portugal, and, apart from short periods, Spain and Italy.⁵ As we will see, the Hungarian case further challenges this narrative while pointing to the need to consider the suffrage in a more nuanced manner.

The second clarification concerns the formerly “nearly hegemonic” model of “first wave” and “second wave” women's movements, in which the First World

War marks the end of the high period of the “first-wave” women’s movements.’⁶ Since the 1990s women’s historians have come to a consensus over the relative merits of the war itself in achieving the suffrage, recognizing the primacy of long-term developments and the continuities between the pre- and immediate postwar periods over false breakthroughs conveniently aligning with global events.⁷ Others pointed to the problem of measuring the advancement of women’s rights solely on the basis of the vote, a point which, as will be shown, is particularly salient in interpreting the Hungarian case.⁸

The traditional narrative of Central and East-Central Europe has long treated the First World War as a milestone in multiple ways; and it would be impossible to deny the war’s fundamental impact on all aspects of the region’s political, economic, and social history, including the redrawing of its map and establishing new states. Equally difficult to dismiss would be the fundamental importance of the war and especially its conclusion to Hungarian history. The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the end of Hungary as a multi-ethnic country, the two revolutions of 1918 and 1919, the counter-revolution, the January 1920 elections, the establishment of Horthy as regent in March 1920, and the consolidation of his regime by 1922 all attest to the war’s role as the single most important event in the country’s twentieth-century history.

Leaving this chronological framework in place, a parallel sub-narrative, emerging in Hungarian historiography since the 1970s, has woven two other significant dates into the timeline of early-twentieth-century history. Most notably, this scholarship rediscovered the Hungarian *fin de siècle*, re-energized intellectual and cultural history, and took into account parties and political movements deprived representation in Parliament. In addition to a more nuanced treatment of the Social Democratic Party (MSZDP) – always a stalwart of the preceding Marxist historiography – it highlighted the important role of the democratic socialists gathered around the journal *Twentieth Century* (Huszadik Század) and later in the Bourgeois Radical Party in political and intellectual life – and awarded a footnote to liberal feminists as well.⁹ The two dates of this sub-narrative, 1906 and 1916, mark turning points in Hungarian political and intellectual history; they signalled, respectively, a break between presumed national interests and progress and the coming together of a radical right-wing, anti-Semitic nationalist rhetoric and political coalition.¹⁰

Whether the addition of the perspectives of women’s activism and gender will confirm, modify, or subvert in any way the traditional periodization – the initial ambition of women’s history when it set out to establish and legitimize the field – is a question I will address indirectly throughout this study.¹¹ Some of the chapters

follow the traditional timeframe quite obediently, for instance Chapter 3 on women's activism during the two postwar revolutions, to acknowledge the significance of the revolutions and counter-revolution that fundamentally altered the framework of women's activism. My choice of treating the suffrage campaigns and the date of the first election that featured women voters as central to the book's narrative reflects the crucial place of the suffrage in the feminist programme. At the same time, both these events demonstrate the limitations of the suffrage in and of itself to bring about political change and the potential of universal suffrage to enforce and even legitimize authoritarian rule.

This history of the three main strands – liberal feminist, conservative-nationalist, and socialist – of women's activism in Hungary in this singularly turbulent period is not only the first to offer their detailed history but also the first that considers their dynamic with one another and the broader political context.¹² As such, it can furnish important modifiers to the chronology of mainstream political history. As we will see, whether wartime or postwar, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, the mobilization and re-mobilization of each of the three movements and activists at times followed in lockstep but at other times anticipated and preceded the developments in politics at large. Ultimately, integrating women's and gender history into the Hungarian history of the years 1918 to 1920 subverts, if only in subtle ways, the prevailing narrative of Hungarian history. Perhaps more importantly, both the broader – 1913 to 1922 – and narrower – late 1917 to early 1920 – timeframes of this study confirm the temporal definition of the First World War as significantly longer – stretching from 1911 to 1923 – than previously understood.¹³ In another reminder of the importance of considering national histories in a comparative European perspective, the evidence of the Hungarian women's movements and activists in this period reinforces the value of studying the 'aftermath' of the First World War in a comparative European context.¹⁴

Scope and scholarship

Originally conceived as the first comprehensive study of right-wing women activists, this study has gradually been extended. In its final form, it encompasses the liberal feminist movement, against which the right-wing women's movement defined itself, along with a wide range of women's activism during the two revolutions. This has happened almost against my intention, out of what I felt was a somewhat old-fashioned but necessary and highly overdue task: to write women *into* the most turbulent period in twentieth-century Hungarian history.

Almost a hundred years after these events, we should have a history of the First World War, the two revolutions in its aftermath, and the counter-revolution with women in it. This study is meant to represent a step in that direction.

The book has a second, more ambitious objective: to contribute to a gendered history of Hungary's history in the first half of the twentieth century. Writing women's activism into the suffrage campaign of the last war year, as well as the multiple periods of electoral campaigning by, and political re-mobilization of, women will not only round out the political history of this period but provide a long-overdue examination of the history of citizenship. This is all the more important because, as I will argue, it all played out during the very period when the content and definition of Hungarian citizenship underwent a fundamental shift.¹⁵ Moreover, the changing dynamic – and ultimate changing of the guard – between the liberal and right-wing nationalistic women's movements illustrated, and to some degree preceded, the paradigm shift between the liberal prewar and illiberal post-revolutionary periods.

The special focus on right-wing women activists serves two aims: it rescues their legacy and demonstrates their significant contribution to the counter-revolutionary ideology. One could argue that the privileged position and full government support these activists enjoyed in the interwar period – and, indeed, the recent revival of their legacy in post-Communist Hungary – makes this task unnecessary. But it is a legacy that needs to be explored and its revival closely examined and questioned; for the contribution of right-wing nationalistic women was crucial to the long-term appeal of the interwar authoritarian regime. Moreover, such an exploration reveals the fundamentally gendered nature of the counter-revolutionary rhetoric and ideology and points at the ways in which it managed to penetrate Hungarian society.

This brings me to two areas of historical scholarship my study has benefited from and, at the same time, is hoping to contribute to: the historiography of European women's movements in the interwar period, in particular of right-wing and fascist women, and Hungarian historical scholarship of the interwar era, especially the right-wing movements. Both fields have shown an explosive growth recently but for very different reasons. In the first case, aside from pioneering studies on German Nazi women and the gendered aspects of the Italian Fascist regime, women's historians have come quite reluctantly to the study of right-wing women, a reluctance that may be at least partially explained by the progressive, activist roots of women's history.¹⁶ Be that it may, the studies accumulated in the last two decades have significantly broadened our understanding of female activism.¹⁷ They highlighted the ways right-wing