

Diverging Language Uses: Political Discourse in Hungary after World War I

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Following some introductory notes on methodology, this study analyzes the process of the intensifying militarization, polarization, brutalization, sacralization, saturation with extreme appeals to emotions, and apocalyptic tone of Hungarian political texts after 1918. It also examines the ways in which the National Darwinist political vocabulary, which evolved originally in the last third of the nineteenth century, survived after the World War, and how it created the double languages of nationalist discourse: the historicizing one and the racist one.

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Although when reading historiographical works, I prefer fine-grained contextual analyses working with a synchronic sample to large-scale canonical ones based on a diachronic linguistic set,¹ in this discussion, I adopt the latter methodology in the introductory part to demonstrate the obstacles one encounters when attempting an examination of the conclusions of the Hungarian political-intellectual history of World War I. The perspective and questions of political-intellectual historians differ, in my assessment, from those of political historians. The latter are primarily interested in political acts and purposes and the course and causes of events, while the former focus on the ways in which language is used and the linguistic means by which political identities are created, reinforced, and weakened; in other words, on the linguistic arena of politics as one of the preconditions of acts and purposes. Researchers who follow a methodology similar to mine concentrate mostly on the “order of statement” to which the individual statement of the political writing in question belongs.² This will be my focus in the following analysis of various Hungarian writings from the years following World War I.

1 On the distinction between historical and canonical examinations, see Takáts, “Saját hitek,” 13–14.

2 Cf. Pocock, “Burke and the Ancient Constitution,” 206.

When analyzing early modern texts from the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth century, one can rely on the great academic achievements (mainly in English) that have been realized in the examination of political discourses. However, when interpreting writings from the twentieth century, we have to get by without the support of Pocock and Skinner. As is well-known, the major historians of political discourses who published their works in English ended the range of their research at the end of the eighteenth century, while their contemporary fellow researchers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (excellent intellectual historians such as Stefan Collini and Michael Freedon, for example) followed a different methodology. The major, influential and chiseled, long-standing political discourses of early modernism that drew partly on antique *pre-texts* and partly on newly emerged disciplines, the discourses of republicanism, *raison d'état*, the ancient constitution, cultivation, political economy and (later discovered) company were gradually dissolved in the standardizing language and dialects of modern politics from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, the archetextual conventions in the political texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are different from the early modern ones: such “order of statement,” which although differing from the characteristics of the former great political discourses, still ensures the meaningfulness of the individual statements.

This methodological difficulty is topped with the uncertainty of the canonical place of World War I in the narratives of Hungarian history. In my opinion, the experiences of 1918–1919 (or 1918–1921), which were, of course, different for each social group, isolated or overshadowed the experiences of World War I in the memory of the political community. They pushed the latter into familial remembrance, thus severing from cause from and consequence: defeat in the war and the Treaty of Trianon with which it came to a formal close. This explains the curious phenomenon that, as has been pointed out recently by a scholar of the social history of the Great War, “in the Hungarian historical conscience,” in contrast with other countries, there is meager interest in World War I and its implications, even though “the number of Hungarian soldiers who died in the war exceeded by far half a million.”³

The canonical place of World War I is fundamentally determined by its borderline character: whatever happened in or to Hungary before 1918 has become a thing of the past, and it no longer generates any heated or contradictory

3 Bihari, *Lövészárkok a háttérországban*, 12.

emotions in the members of the political community. However, whatever happened in 1918 and afterwards (or whatever did not happen, though we think it did) is history that cannot sink into the past.⁴ World War I has become a thing of the past, as did the history of the Principality of Transylvania of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, whereas its direct temporal (political-historical) implications are unable to do the same. To put it differently, today's political agents can use World War I only with minimal efficacy, while they can very effectively use history in or after 1918. In the introduction to his seminal work *The Identity of France*, Fernand Braudel protested against the idea according to which “France ‘began’ in the eighteenth century with the Age of Enlightenment, that France was born of the dramatic ordeal to which it was subjected during the violence of the Revolution.” For him, the history of France dated back to the mist of times, to the third millenary BCE.⁵ Hungarian historians could similarly protest against the notion that Hungary “was born of the dramatic ordeals” of the civil wars of 1918–1921. Yet this opinion has its own revelatory force, as did the French view criticized by Braudel.

The great French historian expressed his unease when he stated that “what irks me even more is the drastic curtailing of chronology it implies: *the ancien régime* and the French Revolution are near to us in time, almost contemporary.”⁶ He was quite right about that. Likewise, Hungarian historians would also be well-advised not to let the events and texts of 1918–1921 become events and texts of the immediate past, “virtual parts of contemporaneity.” They should not let them lose their historical specificity as a result of a closing in of chronological proportions. Naturally, this methodological norm does not override the epistemological recognition that we cannot step outside our perspective of the present in our historiographical works. The past reproduced and narrated by us usually in writing is a peculiar construct: the past is always the past of the present, and the question is always: how so? And vice versa, our epistemological recognition does not redeem us from the (historical and not canonical or historical-political) obligation of a historian's job to hear and make heard (in spite of the obvious challenges) the voice of the past in a form that is unassimilated to the present, but which can be reconstructed only in a construed

4 I discuss this in more detail in my review of Péter György's book *Állatkert Kolozsváron – képzelt Erdély*. Takáts, “Öt széljegyzet.”

5 Braudel, *The Identity of France*, vol. 1, *History and Environment*, 19.

6 Ibid.

manner. This expectation, like so many other expectations in life, is, of course, hard to meet.

Many of the scholars of World War I (contemporaries and later historiographers) depicted the Great War as a beginning: as an alpha. In his book-length essay entitled *Világos pillanat* (Clear Moment), dated summer 1941, Imre Csécsy wrote that the World War had been, in fact, going on for a quarter of a century, and that “the old war was simply started over.”⁷ This pattern is found in many other works, i.e., the notion that World War II was a continuation of World War I. “How long has this night been?” Csécsy asked in 1943. “Four years? Ten years? No, thirty years or so by now. / At the beginning of the century we thought the Age of Reason was dawning on us. [...] And then came the senseless canon fire.”⁸ The *aufklarist* metaphors of *Világos pillanat* made the year 1914 a kind of boundary, the origin of what was the present at the time, as opposed to the efforts of the Hungarian left and right in their policy on the past, the latter drawing the line at the year of 1918. In 1943, the experience of World War II made the experience of World War I live and *contemporary*. This is a prime example of the narrowing of chronological proportions mentioned by Braudel.

Another example (this one related to a historian) of a presentation of the Great War as a beginning is François Furet’s work *The Passing of an Illusion*, one of the main, oft-cited theses of which claimed that the three major totalitarian regimes and ideologies of the twentieth century (communism, fascism, and national socialism) “shared the same source—the war,”⁹ and they inherited their essential characteristics from the latter. As a continuation to war and war propaganda, a new political culture was formed according to Furet, which was characterized by a political discourse seeking immediate effect and losing any connection with morality, characterized also by mass manipulation, scorn for legitimacy, the veneration of power, the (deliberate) changing of political views into beliefs, “the former made up of noble intentions and ideas, the latter of expedience.”¹⁰

I also find these statements important, and I will rely on them, but I see more of an intellectual-historical relation between the political texts known from before 1914 and those produced after 1918 than that for which the birth metaphor and the concept of the new political culture of the French historian

7 Csécsy, *Világos pillanat*, 25, 104.

8 Ibid., 349.

9 Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, 162.

10 Ibid., 169–73.

would allow. To put it differently and to borrow Hans-Ulrich Wehler's metaphor, from an epistemological perspective, I perceive the Great War rather as a "giant transformer,"¹¹ and not as an instigator

Likewise, Hannah Arendt sought the roots of totalitarianism not in World War I, but in the decades preceding it. I agree that the "transformation of nations into races," that is, the conception of a more elementary, more original, naturalist political community behind the conventional one, which was partly made possible by the influence of Social Darwinism,¹² was a decisive factor in the intellectual history between the two wars. For me, however, the key notion of the explanation is not racism but national Darwinism. Béla Németh G. wrote his fundamental study on national Darwinism several decades ago;¹³ it does not bode well for the Hungarian historical scholars of the racial narrative that they ignore this piece of work. There are also some authors connected to the international literature of nationalism research who emphasized the significance of the Darwinian motivation in the transformation of the concept of nation at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The Hungarian nationalist narrative was filled with concepts, arguments, and narratives taken from the Darwinian description of biological evolution in the 1870s,¹⁵ and this vocabulary was still in use in the 1920s, as I will shortly demonstrate with some relevant examples. For the moment, I only sought to highlight the continuity in intellectual history, although the "giant transformer" of war changed this vocabulary as well.

I do not intend, however, to diminish the undeniable intellectual-historical impact of the Great War. After 1918, the war was displaced onto the civil war between the political left and right, as the above-cited German historian Wehler observed.¹⁶ As I was trying to come up with a title for this paper, I considered "The Languages of the Civil War." I decided to go for a more attenuated phrasing simply because not every political player spoke a civil-war language after 1918. Later analysts are often impressed by the radical speakers of yesteryear, and they often lose sight of thoughtful argumentation. I wanted to avoid this trap. It is not only the literature that I follow when I refer to the Hungarian period from

11 "Seither erwies sich dieser Krieg als ein gewaltiger 'Transformator,' der alle beteiligten Völker mit ihrer Wirtschaft und Sozialstruktur, ihrer Staatsverfassung und Innenpolitik, ihrer Mentalität und Wertewelt..." See Wehler, "Der zweite Dreißigjährige Krieg," 26.

12 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 157, 171.

13 Németh G., "Létharc és nemzetiség."

14 Gellner, "A nacionalizmus kialakulása," 67–68.

15 Takáts, *Modern magyar politikai eszméletörténet*, 69–70.

16 Wehler, "Der zweite Dreißigjährige Krieg."

1918 to 1921 as the years of civil war. There were some contemporary analysts who also approached the subject from this perspective.¹⁷ The title of this paper (“Diverging Language Uses”) implies that the processes of homogenization and divergence are simultaneously present in the modern language of politics. There are times when the processes of homogenization become more visible, and there are times in which divergence is more conspicuous. The years following World War I belong to the latter category.

The mushrooming of military metaphors and narratives in political writings can be regarded as the most direct consequence of the war. Metaphors and narratives play a crucial role in the creation and understanding of the “universes” of political texts. Not only do they direct the perception of the “world,” they also make it possible to imagine the forms of action in it: “Metaphor, therefore, defines the pattern of perception to which people respond,” Murray Edelman noted many years ago.¹⁸ Literary historian János Horváth’s 1921 booklet *Aranytól Adyig* (From Arany to Ady) contains in its title the names of two major poets in the Hungarian canon, nineteenth-century poet János Arany and early twentieth-century poet Endre Ady. Thus, we could hardly be blamed for assuming that it is a work of literary history, but it is just as much a political pamphlet. In this writing, Horváth describes the relationship of so-called conservative literature to the modernist school as follows: “There are two camps facing each other, but out of shooting range. Years have gone by since they first lined up. We have been waiting to see what will happen. In fact, nothing happened: a bit of shaking of the fists on the ramparts and constant clamor in the other camp.”¹⁹ Horváth thus conceptualizes literary life in terms of the movements of troops and sieges.

Military metaphors also abound in György Lukács’s article published in 1920 about Ottó Korvin. Lukács writes about outposts, vanguards, self-sacrificing heroism, enemies, mercenaries, and being on guard. He offers the following characterization of Korvin, the people’s commissar of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic: “As a true revolutionary, he did not undertake to carry out whatever duty was entrusted to him, but he performed his task with ardor and with all his might, a task that he did not seek and which profoundly contradicted his personal inclinations.”²⁰ If we exchange the word “revolutionary” for

17 For instance, Rupert, “Egy lustrum távlatából,” 24. A further example: Csécsy, “A pénz és az állam,” 26.

18 Edelman, “Metaphor and Language Forms,” 67.

19 Horváth, *Aranytól Adyig*, 5. For a brief analysis of the booklet, see Takáts, “Megfigyelt megfigyelők.”

20 Lukács, “Korvin Ottó,” 66.

“soldier” in the above sentence, we get the ideal portrait of the good soldier. Lukács’s text partly created the “true revolutionary” on the analogy of the “true soldier.” Zoltán Szász’s ambitious essay about Octobriism (the politics of the Hungarian revolution of 1918 was called by that name at the time) relates the whole history of humanity through war metaphors. In his first paragraph, he writes about fronts, frontlines, sudden advances, captured posts, and combat victories (although he abandons these metaphors later).²¹ Gyula Gömbös, a key figure in the counterrevolutionary actions of 1919 and future racist party leader and prime minister, was described by the historian József Vonyó, who had studied him, as follows: “it is perceptible until the end of his career that he judged even the most complicated social problems from the angle of the soldier, and he wanted to solve them with soldierly simplicity. In his speeches, he would often refer to society as an army of disciplined soldiers following orders.”²²

In Gömbös’s case, this is perhaps not so surprising. He was a military officer, after all. One of the reasons for the militarization of political texts could be that, as of 1918, there appeared in politics a legion of former military officers whose behavior and speech was quite different from the political patterns of the previous era. Some historians went so far as to call the members of the radical rightwing war generations who came on the stage after the war “a new political entrepreneurial class.”²³ One of the consequences of the militarization of political writings was the dichotomization and polarization of the political arena construed by the texts. Political scientists usually argue, often referring to Carl Schmitt, that the dynamics of politics tends to create *ab ovo* a bipolar “universe” based on the logic of friend-enemy. That is not true. In reality, there are many kinds of linguistic constructions concerning the political space that differ from this. Even when presenting conflicting social situations, there have been such narrative types available that do not create an extremely polarized space. In his 1907 book *Uj Magyarország felé* (Toward a new Hungary), the “free socialist” Oszkár Jászi depicted the essential social conflict as a dialogue of generations in which one party is able to convince the other.²⁴ Arguing for the importance of securing Hungarian cultural supremacy, Kuno Klebelsberg, the Christian-

21 Szász, “Az októberizmus történelem-bölcészeti kritikája,” 207.

22 Vonyó, “Gömbös Gyula jobboldali radikalizmusa,” 245.

23 Janos, *Haladás, hanyatlás, hegemonia*, 177. According to the author, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, two new classes of political entrepreneurs appeared in two waves, thus transforming the world of politics: first the radical intelligentsia and then far-right radicals. See also 160–63.

24 Jászi, *Uj Magyarország felé*. For a brief analysis, see Takáts, “Eötvös-revizió,” 32.

nationalist minister of culture, used a car-race simile in his parliamentary speech in 1928, conceiving of the political space given for the nation as a multi-player race course where one is competing against the neighboring nations.²⁵

In the bipolar space of the political texts written after World War I, we find players in combat: Jews versus Hungarians, e.g., in János Horváth's above-cited booklet, or bourgeoisie versus proletariat in György Lukács's abovementioned article. We could mention innumerable writings as examples of both cases. And since many texts construed the "universe" of politics in similar ways, certain political speakers were given an opportunity to build their own positions in the space between the two previously created poles. In an editorial written for the newspaper *Népszava* in 1929, Ernő Garami, a proletarian leader returning from exile in Vienna, urged the social democratic working class to conduct a dual struggle: fight against bolshevism on the left and fascism on the right because both "are aiming for dictatorship, and because the biggest enemy of the working class is any type of dictatorship."²⁶ In his critique of Jászi's memoirs in 1921, the liberal writer and businessman Miksa Fenyő found a different arrangement for more or less the same players in the political space construed in his text: when returning to the old political discourse, he put the dichotomy of "fanatics vs. skeptical minds" in the focus of his argumentation,²⁷ as a result of which the "fanatic" revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries found themselves in the same compartment, while the other pole was occupied by the "skeptic" speaker himself, who was a "sworn enemy of all kinds of revolutions and even of counterrevolution."²⁸

Furthermore, the language of politics underwent an extreme "sentimentalization" in post-World War I political texts. One of the key domains of the latter was the irredentist narrative, which appealed to the emotions of pain, mourning, solidarity, devotion, etc., of its readers and listeners. In his 2009 book on the revisionist idea (which aimed to restore the borders of the Hungarian state, which had been modified after 1918), historian Miklós Zeidler quotes a speech held by Nándor Urmánczy, a speaker from one of the irredentist

25 Klebelsberg, *Neonacionalizmus*, 245–47.

26 Garami, "Jobbra is–balra is." It is worth adding to the above citation that the author called the Horthy régime "pseudo-parliamentary fascism." Garami, "Amíg nem késő."

27 On the "ardor versus self-restraint" model, see Takáts, "Kemény Zsigmond és a rajongás politikai fogalma," 1214.

28 Fenyő, "Elmúlt hetekből." Fenyő's self-description evoked the words of József Eötvös from the nineteenth-century Hungarian liberal tradition and those of Thomas Babington Macaulay from the English one.

organizations, the Alliance of Protective Leagues (*Védő Ligák Szövetsége*), in 1920: “At the end of his speech [given for the inauguration of the statue], he expressed the intention of the Alliance—in accordance with the agenda of revenge—that the irredentist group of statues ‘become a place of pilgrimage for the nation, [...] a furnace of hate and vengeance.’”²⁹ Hate and vengeance became fundamental political sentiments in communist texts as well. In his diary, émigré writer Béla Balázs described the communist commemoration of Ottó Korvin held in Vienna in January 1921: “The day before yesterday [there was] a Korvin commemoration in the underground room of Café Neue Wiener Bühne. The paper was a piece of black wallpaper with red stars, a big red gallows above the rostrum. Heated and fervent speeches: revenge! revenge! Then Gyuri [György Lukács] spoke beautifully, with pale ecstasy...”³⁰ I do not know whether Lukács delivered his previously cited Korvin article or a version of it at the commemoration. In any case, the emotional economy of the article relied heavily on the polarizing distribution of love and hate: “The gauge of the revolutionary significance of vanguards of the proletariat is love for the proletariat and hatred for the bourgeoisie.”³¹

14–18: Understanding the Great War, a 2000 book by French historians Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker which offers an impressive discussion of the roles of violence, nationalism, and racism in and after World War I, contrasts the theses of Norbert Elias and George L. Mosse regarding the history of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century (in my view, a bit categorically), agreeing with Mosse. Elias, as is well-known, interpreted the German National Socialist system as a halt and a regression in the long process of civilization. By contrast, the French authors believe that “[t]he specific, momentary ‘decline of civilisation’ that Elias later thought he perceived in National Socialist totalitarianism actually took place in 1914–1918.”³² They supported Mosse’s thesis, according to which World War I had signified a genuine cultural turnabout: the brutalization of forms of conduct and uses of language, which then led to fascism and Nazism. As Mosse wrote in his book *Fallen Soldiers*, “during the First World War, in contrast, inspired by a sense of universal mission, each side dehumanized the enemy and called for his unconditional surrender,” as opposed to the practice of

29 Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat*, 201.

30 Balázs, *Napló 1914–1922*, vol. 2, 452–53.

31 Lukács, *Korvin Ottó*, 64.

32 Andoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War*, 34.

justification of the previous wars.³³ This new war mentality lived on after 1918. Let me quote Mosse again: “The vocabulary of political battle, the desire to utterly destroy [sic!] the political enemy, and the way in which these adversaries were pictured, all seemed to continue the First World War mostly against a set of different, internal foes.”³⁴

Brutalization is also detectable in post-World War I Hungarian political texts. In the preface to his book *A harmadik Magyarország* (The Third Hungary), written in 1921 (and in many other articles of his from 1919–1921), Christian-nationalist poet and ideologist István Lendvai called the revolutions of 1918–1919 “rat riots” and classified them as attempts by the Jewry to get into power, the only aim of which was “to step over our dead bodies and proclaim the victorious dominion of the one and only rat-dom.”³⁵ In his reply to a survey conducted by the rightwing newspaper *Gondolat* around Christmas 1919, the Lendvai depicted Hungary as a sick human body infected by “Syrian [i.e., Jewish] microbes” and the “swarming multiplication and evil pillaging” of pathogens that “had to be removed both physically and spiritually” from the body so that the country could be healed by the medicine of the “Christian-national mentality.”³⁶ The metaphorical conceptualization of the political community as a human body and of politics as medicine had been used frequently for several centuries. However, the metaphorization of the political opponent as a bloodthirsty rat or a lethal pathogen was a relatively novel linguistic creation.

After 1918, a multitude of political writings became imbued with an apocalyptic tone. In the closing chapter of his anti-Marxist book *Marxizmus vagy liberális szocializmus* (Marxism or liberal socialism), which was written in exile in Vienna during the autumn of 1919, the aforementioned Oszkár Jászi felt that only religious reform could show the way for humanity “out of the awful crisis [...] of the entire culture.” As he put it, “The cleverest political objective is worth nothing in itself unless accompanied by a review of our fundamental intellectual values. Love instead of hatred, solidarity instead of class struggle, individuality and freedom instead of mass dictatorship ... (etc).”³⁷ Only if such new virtues were to replace the current ones could a “new world” be created, Jászi concludes. The joint idea of the all-encompassing “horrible crisis” of the political community

33 Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, 174.

34 *Ibid.*, 160. This quotation is taken from the chapter entitled “The Brutalization of German Politics.”

35 Lendvai, *A harmadik Magyarország*, 8.

36 Mihelics, “Magyar írók karácsony-esti gondolatai a magyar irodalom újjászületéséről,” 6.

37 Oszkár Jászi, *Marxizmus vagy liberális szocializmus*, 131.

under examination (humanity, the race) and the “new world” dearly longed for but accessible only through some kind of “renewal” that often imbued politics with goals of a religious or quasi-religious nature also emerged in the writings of authors far from Jászi’s universe. In Lendvai’s previously cited book, we witness a catastrophism that is characterized as desirable. “Devastation was unavoidable, necessary and salutary,” Lendvai announces in the first paragraph. He calls the collapse of the country “desirable” and “salutary” because it may release “the self-healing instincts of the race” and “its awesome health and heroic strength.” And this racial revolution could lead to a new life: “Then the Hungarian forest, with its burnt branches and torn-up trunks, will throb again with renewed blood and thick chlorophyll.”³⁸

The apocalyptic tone often entails the sacralization of the political language used in post-World War I texts. The writings of the revisionist movement often presented Hungary’s territorial loss using the narrative and symbols of the Passion of Christ. I cite from the writings of Miklós Zeidler once again:

The minorities, having betrayed Hungary and having benefited from its territory, found themselves in the role of Judas and of the Roman soldiers casting lots for Christ’s mantle; Patrona Hungariae took the shape of Mary, who nourishes the Son, weeps for him, and takes his corpse down from the cross, while the great powers, which did not have the courage to make a fair decision and which shook off all responsibility, were likened to Pilate. This was how the revisionist concept broadened into a kind of religious movement that identified the dissolution of historical Hungary with the story of Christ’s suffering and revision with the good news of the Gospel.³⁹

In his biography of Béla Kun, György Borsányi cites several examples in order to demonstrate how the communist leader used Jesus analogies in various political situations. After he took a beating while in custody in February 1919, Kun was asked about those who had beaten him, and he replied with a sentence alluding to the words of Jesus’ sufferings on the cross (“they know not what they are doing”). At the Young Workers’ Congress in June, Kun cited verses from the Books of Moses, according to which a whole generation had to perish for the next one to enter the Promised Land.⁴⁰ In Borsányi’s assessment, Kun made a huge impression with these gestures.

38 Lendvai, *A harmadik Magyarország*, 10–11.

39 Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat*, 234.

40 Borsányi, *Kun Béla. Politikai életrajz*, 116, 183.

The sacralizing concept and (metaphors) of a new world and the advent of a new life played a fundamental role not only in communist and socialist idiomatic language, but also in the discourses of racialist ideologists. As Lajos Méhely put it in his 1933 criticism of the old-fashioned president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (who belonged to the elite of the Horthy régime but was still very much an old-school liberal) and his fellow scholars, “a new world is dawning on us. They do not believe that the false doctrine of liberalism has fallen once and for all and that a new form of life is spreading its wings. They do not see that the racial spirit has resurrected...”⁴¹ In Méhely’s phrasing, reference to the unquestionable truth of the natural sciences merged with sacralizing expressions from the Christian lexicon. In the 1920s and 1930s, the orators of rightwing veterans’ associations talked in their speeches about “Hungarians suffering for their own kind,”⁴² while communist speakers such as Lukács, who had written about Korvin, sanctified their own political intentions by glorifying the martyrs of the proletariat.⁴³ The narratives of both veterans’ associations and the communist movement merged militarization and sacralization, military virtues and Jesus’ virtues in a continuation of the similar linguistic traditions of the war propaganda.

In his book on political religions, Emilio Gentile writes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was World War I that drove the sacralization of politics the most decisively and the most productively, partly through the intensification of the cult of the nation and partly through the politicization of historical religions.⁴⁴ Gentile defines his understanding of the sacralization of politics and political religion as follows: “A religion of politics is created every time a political entity such as a nation, state, race, class, party or movement is transformed into a sacred entity, which means it becomes transcendent, unchallengeable, and intangible.”⁴⁵ Political religions have existed since the end of the eighteenth century, Gentile writes, and they can imbue democracies just as they do totalitarian régimes. World War I played a key role in our twentieth-century history. War propaganda stressed in every country involved in the war that God was on their side; war was presented as an apocalyptic event, a combat

41 Méhely, “Berzeviczy Albert fajszemlélete.” On Méhely’s racialist views, see Gyurgyák, *Magyar fajvédők*, 87–101.

42 This word usage is quoted in Kerepeszki, “A Turul Szövetség,” 356.

43 Lukács, *Korvin Ottó*, 67.

44 Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 32.

45 *Ibid.*, xiv.

between the good and the bad. Propaganda attempted to justify violence by presenting it as necessary for the victory of good, and it presented the enemy as the incarnation of evil. The speakers of the rightwing veterans' movements and those of the communist movements tailored this sacralized war idiom to suit their own purposes.

The rising militarization, polarization, brutalization, and sacralization of language and the saturation of texts with words and tropes suggesting extreme emotions and an apocalyptic tone (i.e., the linguistic patterns some Hungarian examples of which I have cited above) can be regarded as the intellectual-historical consequences of World War I even if earlier writings had also relied on military metaphors, the dichotomization of space, intense appeals to emotion, and emphasis on an alleged distinction between the sacred and the profane. The influence of the World War is perhaps shown by the co-presence of these patterns in certain texts and the tendency to take them to the extreme. As seen above, these patterns occur in the texts by both leftwing and rightwing authors, but not in each and every one of them. One of the most common experiences of researchers working on political-intellectual history is the asymmetry between language use and political stance. There were some political writings produced after the war that did not contain any of these patterns. One could mention, for instance, Miksa Fenyő's above-cited criticism of Jászi or the commemorative speech by old-school liberal historian Dávid Angyal for István Tisza (which I did not cite in the discussion above). In István Bethlen's inaugural speech as prime minister in 1921, one hardly discerns any indications of this kind, similarly to the 1922 theoretical declaration by the Social Democratic Party of Hungary.

In his excellent book *A nép lelke* (Soul of the people), Balázs Trencsényi recently advanced the thesis that Hungarian political culture saw an ethno-cultural turn after 1919.⁴⁶ I have several objections against this claim. I believe its validity does not extend to speakers who can be considered leftwing politicians and who scarcely used any ethno-nationalist vocabulary in those times. However, as I mentioned above, a pronounced ethno-nationalist discourse had been in use for several decades: the national Darwinist discourse. In the last third of the nineteenth century, it was already in parallel use or in symbiosis with the archaizing idiomatic language of nationalism—as was the case with plenty of texts after World War I. The irredentist movement, the objective of which was to restore Hungary's prewar borders, could not abandon its archaizing discourse for the

46 Trencsényi, *A nép lelke*, 356.

sake of an ethno-cultural one.⁴⁷ At most, it mixed them. Thus, I would describe the transformation of Hungarian political culture after 1919 in the following way: the archaizing and ethno-nationalist doublespeak of the aristocracy came into a dominant position, while all other utterances that did not use this double language or some discursive variant of it were pushed to the periphery or semi-periphery of political discourse. László Péter, an excellent historian based in London, once gave the following title to an interview presenting his oeuvre: “I have always considered the state itself as the protagonist.”⁴⁸ Personally, I consider the ruling class the protagonist of modern Hungarian history, so I will first have a look at the two languages spoken by the ruling class and then at one used by their linguistic rivals.

The national Darwinist past of the post-World War I racial narrative can be studied in many, many texts. The 1921 article “Két faj harca” (The struggle of two races) by Dezső Szabó, perhaps the most influential radical rightwing writer and ideologist, features not only the key notions of this half-century-old lexicon (fight for survival, the battle among races over life and death), but its consequences as well:

1. In this life-or-death battle, every member of the race is a potential source of solidarity and help for all the members of the race.
2. In the critical moments of the fight for survival, every member of the race can subordinate his own interests to those of the race.
3. The members of the race are capable of the most heroic acts of taking initiative and responsibility for the sake of the race.⁴⁹

This three-point *normative* description is that of the Jewish race fighting a life-or-death battle with Hungarians, for according to Szabó, the Jewry is the kind of race whose example another race must imitate if it wants to come out victorious in the fight for survival. This vocabulary creates an extremely conflictual political universe in which the conflict cannot be resolved, the stakes could not be higher, and the essential struggle requires the continuous and intense attention of the players—huge, nondescript, homogeneous collectives that cannot be broken down into more original components. At the same time, this political universe

47 See for example Zoltán Krasznai's book on the continuity of the nationalist discourse surrounding geography: Krasznai, *Földrajztudomány, oktatás és propaganda*, 99.

48 Péter, *Az Elbától keletre*, 385.

49 Szabó, “Két faj harca.” Péter Nagy was wrong in claiming in his monograph that this article was about “the racial supremacy of Hungarians.” See Nagy, *Szabó Dezső*, 307.

has a certain moral beauty and heroism of its own (at least in Szabó's version): it offers safety for the members of the collective and allows them to live a heroic life. However, the limits of morality stop at the boundaries of the race: there is no such thing as interracial ethics.

The national Darwinist discourse is both naturalist and will-based. Races are the way they have been shaped by fate because they are natural and not cultural communities. The concept of race does not imply a choice. "The Jews are compelled by an implacable force innate to their faith and blood to seek continuous conquest," Szabó writes. At the same time, it does not suffice for races to survive. They must strive to comply with the normativity of the race so that they will be characterized by "a magnificent unity, a planned combat," "a gigantic construction of the future." According to Szabó, Jews satisfy this norm of the race, while Hungarians do not. The elements of national Darwinist reasoning listed above were not products of the war. Nearly all of them are found in László Arany's ambitious 1872 poem "Hunok harca" (Battle of the Huns), in which Arany presents the fight for the survival of the German race and the Hun/Hungarian race. Some post-World War I writings applied the narrative of the fight among the races without using any of the national Darwinist core concepts. One such work is the previously mentioned booklet by János Horváth, *Aranytól Adyig*. In Lendvai's aforementioned *A harmadik Magyarország*, national Darwinist reasoning is complemented with racist arguments: for Lendvai, the Jews constitute an inferior race with "a slavish soul," and this is the dominant contention of the text. The anti-Semitic perspective could, indeed, be coupled with various languages in political texts after World War I.

The racial narrative did not replace the archaizing idiomatic language of nationalism after 1918. Rather, the two coexisted side by side. This is how racial biologist Lajos Méhely quite self-assertively began his article criticizing Albert Berzeviczy, the president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: "In the domain of the racial idea, I do not consider myself incompetent, for it is common knowledge that when the one-thousand-year-old Hungary was laid on the bier by her external and internal enemies, I was one of the first to recognize the true reasons for our collapse," which was, Méhely contends, the "Jewish menace."⁵⁰ In this sentence, the expression "one-thousand-year-old Hungary" evokes the archaizing framework, while being "laid on the bier" is part of the irredentist narrative, which also used the archaizing framework. In fact, it was

50 Méhely, *Berzeviczy Albert fajszemlélete*.

the same language that the other party, Berzeviczy, used when he uttered the following words criticized by Méhely: “The Hungarian land and the Hungarian nation dispose of an unparalleled assimilative force that imbues with every true virtue and turns into genuine Hungarians even those who did not originate from Hungarians.”⁵¹ It was not the language that Méhely was refuting, but its implications: he rejected assimilation, i.e., the view that assimilation could override ancestry.

In a clear-cut case, these two nationalist discourses would have a different community in the center: for the archaizing one, it would be the nation as a political community, whereas for the racial narrative, it would be race as a natural community before politics. When writing his article and faced with Berzeviczy’s argument, Méhely must have been aware of this conflict, yet he maintained the tense coexistence of the two discourses in his text. Thus, if we suppose that he did this on purpose, then he must have proceeded in this way because it was the presence of the archaizing framework that linked his text to the linguistic milieu of the political-cultural elite of the Horthy regime or because the archaizing language would lend some patina to his reasoning. Perhaps he hoped to buttress the communicativeness and authority of his text by drawing on the archaizing framework. Lendvai might have been motivated by similar considerations when, in the preface to *A harmadik Magyarországg*, which is thoroughly dominated by the racial narrative, coming to the vision of the racial future in his line of thought (in the very last sentence of the preface), he changed “faj” (race) to “nemzet” (nation), a word that he had not used before: “I believe, I wish, I hope: my nation [“nemzet”] and I myself will see the advent of more lasting, creative values, and national life will be able to continue with the unconscious, un-reflected self-expression of a strong organism.”⁵² While in Dezső Szabó’s article, conscious racial life was the norm, the goal envisioned by Lendvai was the unconscious and vitalist implementation of racial existence.

Historian Miklós Szabó offers the following explanation for the surge of racial discourse in the interwar period: given the territorial losses the country had experiences, the rightwing elite drew the conclusion that the “political mythology” of the nation as a historical community had proven weak in comparison to the elementary ethnic awareness of the minorities that were tearing the country apart. The historical state had not proven firm enough to maintain the political

51 “Berzeviczy Albert ünnepi beszéde Herczeg Ferenc hetvenedik születésnapja alkalmából,” 316.

52 Lendvai, *A harmadik Magyarországg*, 13.

community, thus a more stable and more fundamental framework had to be found for the political community: i.e., race and ethnicity as a pre-political community of descent.⁵³ This is probably how it all happened. But I think that the rightwing elite drew some conclusions not only from the territorial losses the country had faced, but also from having lost its own leading position in 1918–1919, which led to the spread of the racial narrative.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the archaizing nationalist discourse was still needed in order to justify the recovery of lost territories and the preservation of the traditional ruling position. This political language remained effective throughout the interwar era and World War II, it outlived the decades of the communist regime, and as has been shown in Gábor Zoltán Szűcs’s political science analysis, it played a fundamental role in the political reasoning at the time of the political transformation.⁵⁵ The upswing of the racial narrative could also be explained as an effect of war propaganda, as the aforementioned Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker do in *14–18: Understanding the Great War* did.⁵⁶

The notion of race meant not only a more elementary community than the nation: it staked a claim to a certain natural scientific legitimacy, and it was also imbued with a certain fatality and combativeness at the time. Miklós Szabó is discerning with his contention that, in the interwar period, race was an “anti-Semitic technical term,” though this conceals the other side of the concept as the carrier of a social promise. Authors who wrote about a racial revolution in 1919–1921, such as Endre Zsilinszky, a fellow party member of Gömbös’ at the time, were expecting to see a major overall spiritual transformation that “must reshape the mentality and morality of the Hungarian nation.”⁵⁷ Analyzing a parallel German phenomenon in his book *The Crisis of German Ideology*, George L. Mosse points out that the supporters of the “German revolution” came from social classes that sought to maintain their privileged status above the working classes but were, at the same time, utterly dissatisfied with their world: “The tension between their desire to preserve their status and their equally fervent

53 Szabó, “Magyar nemzetfelfogások a 20. század első felében.”

54 More specifically, from the increase of the profiteering and increased influence of the rival social group during the war. According to Péter Bihari, it was from 1916 that the internal fault line of the middle class became a virtual abyss; that was when the press began to write about “Jewish expansion.” Bihari, *Lövészárkok a háttérországban*, 14–15.

55 Szűcs, *Az antallai pillanat*. With regard to national history as a political language, see especially page 16.

56 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *1914–1918. Understanding the Great War*, 154.

57 Zsilinszky’s article published in *Szózat* on March 11, 1920 is quoted in Kerepeszki, *A Turul Szövetség 1919–1945*, 159.

desire to radically alter society was resolved by the appeal to a spiritual revolution which would revitalize the nation without revolutionizing its structure.”⁵⁸ This description could also be applied to the social promise of the Hungarian racial revolution.

As the militarization and sacralization of the postwar political texts demonstrate, part of the “discursive toolkit” at the disposal of speakers was used by political players who considered one another adversaries or enemies. There were, however, some key concepts, metaphors, narratives, and explanatory schemas that continued to be restricted to a given political subculture. Indeed, it was partly these linguistic patterns that engendered political subcultures. Class struggle, class oppression, and class exploitation were the notions common to the leftist discourses, while Jewish expansion, Christian renaissance, and racial instinct common to those of the right (which is not to say that the former cropped up in every leftwing writing, much as the latter were not necessarily found in every rightwing piece of discourse). The two sets of three expressions create radically different and decidedly fictive universes.⁵⁹ There are often different political subcultures behind diverging language uses: fictive communities and institutions making it possible to imagine them.⁶⁰ At the end of the century, the nineteenth-century process of the homogenization of the language of modern politics was broken by the separation of two political subcultures with different social backgrounds and different languages: the social democratic workers’ movement and the Catholic-Christian political community. The history of the languages of these two subcultures is the prehistory of the diverging postwar uses of language.

In my handbook on political-intellectual history, I treated the notion of “Hungarian” as understood and used on the right and the left: “These two sides can be characterized the most easily on the basis of their relation to the events of the recent past: the former rejected the initiatives of the two revolutions (and the socialist workers’ movement and ‘radical counterculture’ that preceded these revolutions), while the latter regarded one of them as its own tradition.”⁶¹ Today, I would say, rather, that in the interwar period, it was the continuous exegesis of

58 Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 7.

59 I have borrowed the expression “fictive world” from Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It is not only totalitarian movements that create a fictive world in tension with the normal world, but other political organizations as well that generate a faith-like commitment.

60 “A [political] subculture can be coherent and homogeneous despite weak personal ties. The carrier of such strong ‘spiritual’ integrity is a shared way of speaking.” See Enyedi, *Politika a kereszt jégében*, 28.

61 Takáts, *Modern magyar politikai eszméltörténet*, 106.

the civil war years of 1918–1921 as an “arche-event” that shaped the political traditions of the left and the right. Historian Gergely Romsics, who offers a rich discussion of the narratives of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the memoirs of the members of the political elite, identifies “two *grands récits* with ramifications” in these Hungarian memoirs: leftist and rightist.⁶² Would we get the same result if we studied the exegesis of the civil war years in an extensive text corpus? Romsics arrives at the conclusion that, in the post-World War I years, there were several rightwing linguistic variants in the public discourse (pinned together by a common vision of the enemy) that could compete with the social democratic language (and its Marxist lexicon), but “a consistent democratic-liberal linguistic play was missing.”⁶³

According to Giovanni Sartori, the secession of communists from the social democratic movement after 1918 tied the latter to Marxism more than ever. As Sartori writes, “From 1920 on, a rivalry developed between the brothers who parted for the title of the ‘true Marxist.’ [...] Between 1920 and 1940, the rivalry with Communists forced European Socialists almost unanimously into Marxist positions.”⁶⁴ But this was only partially true of Hungarian social democrats, who remained Marxists,⁶⁵ and their discourse remained partly Marxist as well. But only partly. The necessity of distancing themselves from the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, the impact of the country’s territorial losses on the position of all political players, and the new situation in 1922 (the party making it into the National Assembly) forced the leaders of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary to open up from a linguistic point of view. The June 28, 1922 theoretical declaration of their first parliamentary faction is an interesting document because in its first sentence it adapts to the linguistic context of the utterance through the evocation of the archaizing nationalist discourse only later to use this linguistic gesture for the historical reinterpretation of its own political legitimacy. Below are the opening sentences of this theoretical declaration:

62 Romsics, *Mitosz és emlékezet*, 61. As far as I know, the Hungarian chapter by Romsics (59–97) is the most congenial linguistic analysis of post-World War I Hungarian political texts.

63 Ibid., 76. On rightwing discourses linked by the shared image of the enemy, see 95.

64 Sartori, *Demokrácia*, 165.

65 “I do not know any current people in the Social Democratic Party who would have suggested giving up Marxist dogmas or part of them. Ernő Garami, Anna Kéthly and Antal Bán died as Marxists. Not even in the hour of hardship would Károly Peyer make a concession, so minor in the eyes of present-day practitioners of realpolitik, to change the name of the party from ‘Social Democratic Party of Hungary’ to ‘Hungarian Social Democratic Party.’” Hajdu, “Demokrácia és diktatúra válaszüjtán 1919-ben és 1945 után,” 391.

Upon first appearing in the legislative body of the Hungarian nation after a millennium of state existence to take part in legislative work and national administration on an equal footing with the other social classes within the framework of the state constitution, the representatives of the working class of Hungary wish to dedicate their first words to gratitude and acknowledgment. / We wish to remember our hardworking ancestors, who broke up the fallow land for a long, long time while enduring inconceivable hardships and sufferings ... dripping in the sweat of their faces to make this land fertile and this country suitable for human civilization, and the inhabitants of this country capable of an organized existence as a state and as a society. / They lived in disenfranchisement. Their life and existence were always in the hands of the so-called upper classes of society, so today, when we enter here as their successors, we deem it our duty to place our wreath of gratitude on their unmarked graves and their dust, mixed with the soil of our motherland.⁶⁶

Various elements of the phrasing in these passages cited above, such as “a millennium of state existence,” “the legislative body of the Hungarian nation,” “the framework of the state constitution,” “fertile land,” “dust mixed with the soil of our motherland,” “wreath of gratitude,” are linguistic elements that could occur in any speech using the archaizing language of nationalism, not to mention, of course, the allusion to Genesis 3:19. That such expressions were used here can be interpreted as a cooperative gesture: self-adjustment to the dominant linguistic schemas of official politics. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the choice of political language use is the message itself. At the same time, the passage cited above offers a (non-adaptive) interpretation of political representation in which their own (Marxist) language also looms in the background: the group of working-class representatives regarded itself as the leaders of a class and considered their fellow MPs class representatives as well. Moreover, the second and the third paragraphs offer an alternative historical narrative to the narrative of archaizing nationalism. This alternative narrative elevates the mute, unspoken millennial history of the disenfranchised lower classes to a position alongside the one-thousand-year history of the upper classes that had been written and told so many times, and it does so partly by appropriating some of the expressions of the language of archaizing nationalism.

66 “A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt elvi deklarációja,” 87.

The declaration also announces (also through its language use) the acceptance of the historical constitutional framework (which tacitly implies giving up Marxist objectives) and its plebeian reinterpretation. The alternative narrative of the second and the third paragraphs is a continuation of the earlier efforts of the movement (party) to create its own historical Pantheon and system of traditions.⁶⁷ These paragraphs offer a characterization of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary not simply as the party of the working class but of the lower classes in general. By claiming to speak in the voice of the descendants of the disenfranchised, the party put itself in the position of the accuser leveling charges against the villains of history and the restorer of historical injustice, while its political opponents were shown as the successors to the disenfranchisers. The catchwords of archaizing nationalism provided a linguistic passage to communication with political adversaries, but their alternative use undermined the dominant discourse. Thus, the linguistic strategy of the declaration can be seen as both adaptive and offensive. This, however, cannot be regarded as an intellectual-historical consequence of the Great War. Rather, it was a consequence of the consequences of the war.

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67 Vörös, “A múltat végképp eltörölni?” 109, 111.

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