

Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation (Review)

by Johanna Granville

Copyright: Review by Johanna Granville of Karl P. Benziger, *Imre Nagy. Martyr of the Nation: Contested History, Legitimacy, and Popular Memory in Hungary* (New York, Lexington Books, 2008), published in *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 47, no. 3 (Winter 2012): 675-6.

“Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it,” the French Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne wrote. The 1956 Hungarian revolution and murder of Hungarian prime minister Imre Nagy ranks high on the list of historical world events that has remained, throughout the Cold War period, the object of intense, state-sponsored forgetting. As Karl Benziger, a professor of history at Rhode Island College, points out in *Imre Nagy. Martyr of the Nation*, the „counterrevolution” was not even mentioned in Hungarian history textbooks until 1961 (p. 87). Many textbooks simply stopped with the end of World War II in 1945. Because students could be expelled from school and doomed to lifelong manual labor for saying or writing anything that threatened the communist regime, many parents sought to protect their children by refusing to speak about 1956 to them (p. 91). Although already unmarked, the graves of Nagy and his supporters Miklos Gimes, Géza Losonczy, Pál Maleter , and József Szilágyi in Plot 301 were regularly plowed over. “On All Souls Day” [*Halottak napja*, or day of the dead], June 16, March 15, and October 23, the guards wouldn’t let you anywhere near the plot,” said Imre Mécs, one of the founding members of the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) who

had been imprisoned after the revolution (p. 89). Ironically, Benziger writes, “the state’s negative interpretation of the Revolution and its official acts of prohibition” actually “helped sustain the Revolution’s memory in both acts of passive acceptance and passive resistance to the state’s interpretation” (89). Thus, although a poll taken in 1988 showed that over fifty percent of Hungarians in Budapest construed the revolution as a “counterrevolution,” just one year later, on June 16, 1989, thousands of Hungarians flocked to the respectful reburial of Nagy and his comrades in Budapest’s Heroes Square (p. 91).

Clearly, the post-invasion regimes’ efforts during the Cold War to erase memory had failed. But how does one proceed to write the new, more accurate, history for future generations? How does one treat controversial figures like Nagy, especially when disparate political parties governing the country in coalition cannot agree among themselves whether or not Nagy was a worthy hero who fit their political platforms?

Originally published in hard cover form in 2008, Benziger’s book addresses these and other questions. The book is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature about the processes by which former communist countries have grappled with their pasts. The book is composed of nine concise chapters. In chapter one, the author discusses the politics of commemoration and the role of *kegyelet* (piety, or “duty towards the dead”) in Hungarian history (p.7). Chapter two is devoted to the ceremonial reburial of Nagy on June 16, 1989. In chapter three, entitled “An Unlikely Hero,” Benziger explains the difficulties the former communist party (renamed the Hungarian Socialist Party or MSZP), as well as center and right parties – such the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) and the Christian Democrats (KDNP) - had in wholeheartedly embracing Nagy as their hero. Chapter four

outlines Nagy's actions during the revolution, characterizing him as initially a hesitant revolutionary who in the end made a "fatal gamble." Chapter five covers the Kádár regime's process of "demobilizing" the revolution and the various coping methods of history teachers and professors. In chapters six and seven the author fast-forwards to the 1980s and 1990s again, outlining the economic decline leading to the resignation of János Kádár and the political debates that led both to the ceremonial reburial of Nagy and to the Imre Nagy memorial bill of June 1996. Chapter eight analyzes how new textbooks used in high schools in recent years cover the subject of the 1956 revolution. Finally, in chapter nine ("Epilogue"), Benziger analyzes the fiftieth anniversary demonstrations in September-October 2006, which "betrayed deep divisions within the polity rather than a sense of national solidarity" (p. 152).

Although Benziger provides useful background sketches of the parties in "Appendix C," this information probably should have been incorporated in chapter seven to help readers make sense of the numerous acronyms. The non-chronological sequence of chapters could also confuse readers. Nevertheless, *Imre Nagy. Martyr of the Nation* is well worth reading, and encourages reflection on the evolution of Hungarian historiography. Apart from István Rév's *Retroactive Justice* (2005) and János Rainer's excellent biographies of Imre Nagy, other stimulating studies on history and memory include Katherine Verdery's *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial And Postsocialist Change* (1999); Maria Bucur's and Nancy Wingfield's *Staging the Past: the Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (2001); and Terry Cox's *Challenging Communism in Eastern Europe: 1956 and Its Legacy* (2008).

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