

Introduction

Nullius in verba! Trust not in words! At the beginning of a book of history, built on words found in the depths of archives, the motto of the Royal Society, itself a misappropriated fragment of a line from Horace, is a self-defeating warning. The documents in the archives of repression are, however, largely fabrications: misinformation, blatant lies, overdramatizations, or their opposite: trivializations of dramatic events. The witnesses, the sources of forced confessions, the scribes who took the forged notes, are no longer here to testify; the historian is in the business of death. Still, “*quoniam valde labilis est humana memoria*”—“because human memory is very weak,” as typical medieval charters begin—the historian has no choice but to make use of what has been left behind by bad times. Oftentimes the documents preserve nothing but the record of loss, the unrecoverable traces of that which can no longer be found. As the inscription by the irresponsible clergyman in the *Book of Memory*, the *Liber Memorialis* from Reichenau puts it: “The names that were to have been inscribed in this book but which I have through my negligence forgotten, I commend to you, Christ, and to your mother, and to all the celestial powers, in order that their memory be celebrated here below and in the beatitude of eternal life.”¹

The modern historian tries relentlessly to share responsibility with others: he (in my case) or she is in need of others to verify the words. The

1. Quoted by Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 73.

voice of the sources is evoked in order to support words with facts, to guarantee the reliability of historical assertions. But facts, in the field of history, come wrapped in words. The historian working in archives of misinformation, where the documents have been consciously deformed, had better take the hermeneutic suspicions of the Royal Society seriously. Still, after due consideration, the student of the past should override the forewarning from on high. The historian is not always denied good luck: sometimes, relying on the involuntary help of interrogators, secret agents, or the *mouton des prisons*, I am able to learn even what the accused, the tortured, the executed thought or did before the sentence was carried out; I find intercepted messages, acquired by wire-tapping—although, under Communism, in the midst of grave shortages, where it was mostly the privileged who had telephones in their homes, it was usually unguarded voices in sublet apartments that were tapped.

The interrogation reports or the court documents sometimes reveal connections of which the accused themselves were unaware. The highly centralized regimes did everything to atomize their subjects, who, in most cases, had to act, read, or think alone. The interrogator, however, always suspects conspiracy, organized sabotage, concentrated illegal action, and secret societies behind the hopelessly individuated acts. The policeman is like the typical historian, looking for regularity. And he is right: almost always the cases show more regularity; they are more revealing than what each individual act might otherwise suggest in its singularity.

After the end of “classical” State Socialism, from the beginning of the 1960s, in most of the Central European countries repression became somewhat shy. Open terror was used less and less for pedagogical or mobilization reasons. Reports about the activities of the enemy, about arrests, trials, and sentences were rarely published in the press. (“The Politburo has decided that the report should not be made public [*sic*] in the black-and-white digest [the classified daily information bulletin for the highest echelon of the party]; only department heads of the Central Committee, and the first secretaries of the Budapest and county party committees should have access to the report”—was the top leadership’s decision about the fate of the report on the anti-Communist demonstrations on March 15, 1973, in Budapest.)² Information traveled in a haphazard, unreliable, informal

2. Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian State Archive) (MOL) 288. Fond. 1973, 5/609 ő.e. Published in János Kenedi, *Kis Állambiztonsági Olvasókönyv*, Október 23–

way, even between prison cells. The participants in real acts, not only the imagined enemy, did not know much about the others, who used the same available repertoire of social, cultural, and political action. The very first report to be published about crucially important events of the post–World War II period of Central Europe is, in most cases, the work of the historian, who after very long decades, and after the Fall, discovers unknown documents about unknown events in formerly classified archives.

Had the interrogators not tried hard to prove subterranean connections—sometimes, of course, without the slightest trace of any real relationship at all or by reinterpreting the confessions—posterity would not have been able to learn that the isolated acts shared a common logic, the participants had similar ambitions, and the events show naive uniformity. The historian must rely on the documents the secret services fabricated, for these are sometimes not just the only available sources, but the ones that present a detailed picture from a wider perspective. The subterranean perspective sheds light on the surface. The secret agents were the reliable, although untrustworthy, partners of the future historian; we are collaborators.³

Writing the recent history of the Central and Eastern part of Europe is unlike the work of the Western historian, who can turn to published sources, contemporary reports, memoirs by participants and eyewitnesses, whose work is embedded in solid, mostly normalized and consolidated public memory. Usually it is not the historian who is the messenger there, unlike in the less fortunate part of the world, where the message is, more often than not, bad news. The recent history of Central and Eastern Europe is the history of bad times.

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The primary—one might almost say, the primal—scene of this book is Hungary, and this was, in part, a methodological decision. Hungary is a very small country and it was even smaller during the decades of State Socialism. As a consequence of central planning, centrally imagined uniformity, the ambition of central regulation, and the limited range of available choices, everything and everybody was nearer to each other in the countries

március 15–június 16 a Kádár korszakban [Small State-Security Reader, 23 October–15 March–16 June in the Kádár Era] (Budapest: Magvető, 1966), vol. 2, p. 158.

3. On this fundamental epistemological and methodological issue, in relation to a different historical period, see Carlo Ginzburg, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 156–64.

under Communist rule than is usual or customary under normal circumstances. Most people were forced to live near others: in labor or internment camps, in prison cells, in communal apartments, where several families had to share the former bourgeois apartment of a single family, or in unbelievably tiny flats on huge housing estates, where the neighbors could hear every sound from the adjacent unit.

Communism is the regime of compression: long lines, constant waiting, a limited number of extremely crowded places, people jammed in and pressed close to each other, everybody constantly at the same place. The overwhelming majority, especially the urban dwellers, work for the same employer: the state. Planning was meant to eradicate superfluous parallelism, and this led to a finite, very small number of institutions: universities, research and art institutes, journals, newspapers, restaurants, coffeehouses, all owned or controlled by the very same state. It was difficult to travel internally—in the Soviet Union there were closed cities even in the 1980s, and citizens were required to carry a passport for domestic travel; in Hungary, until the second half of the 1970s, special permission was required to visit a city near the western, Austrian border—and for the majority, it was impossible to travel abroad.

Members of the party elite spent their holidays together in the party's holiday resorts and visited the same special shops and medical institutions, while opposition intellectuals read the same books, frequented the same espresso bars, went to the same movies, worked at and were fired from the same workplaces. Everybody knew everybody else, and even if somebody seemed to be unknown, it was quite easy to guess where the unknown person came from. It was far from atypical for the members of the opposition to be the children of the party elite. I am one of them.

The Communist countries were much smaller than their sheer physical size would have implied. Even the Soviet Union, the largest country on earth, one of the two superpowers—where it took at least nine days for the Trans-Siberian express to traverse the nine-thousand-kilometer width of the country, where during the Brezhnev era the Lake Baikal-Amur railway line (the BAM) was allegedly built (it was not built)—was a great deal smaller than what it was—and what the misinformed outside world thought.

Besides all this, Hungary is a hopelessly monocentric country, where Budapest is the only real urban center on a European scale, where everything happens in that single city. Either you lived in Budapest during the Communist times, or you did not live anywhere. There was no chance of

internal migration; it was impossible to buy an apartment (if you divorced, and Hungary had the highest divorce rate in Europe, you could not move out of your flat, which you had to share with your divorced spouse); changing your workplace or occupation was administratively regulated; emigration was a complicated alternative. Besides the highest divorce rate, as the only real option, Hungary had the highest suicide rate in the whole world. It was a small place with few choices.

The leaders of the small left-wing and later on the Communist movement, who spent their time together first in deep illegality, then, after World War II in power and in the same prisons, gave up, betrayed, imprisoned, then stabbed in the back, executed, and buried each other over and over again; they married each other's wives, slept with each other's husbands and with the widows of their victims. People, murderers and their victims, especially Communist murderers and their Communist victims, lived in incestuous vicinity.

Retribution, the political repression, classified and imprisoned the members of the opposition within the same social and physical space, irrespective of their motives, aims, and political or ideological convictions. It made no difference where they had come from, or where they intended to move. The authorities and their secret services restricted the living space of the imagined or real protesters, resisters, and dissidents, partly to make surveillance easier. In the absence of any alternative, members of the opposition had to live their lives dangerously near one another. The cramped world of the dissidents further increased the paranoia of the state security services, which suspected signs of highly organized conspiracy in every congested public or private space. Gossip, as informal information, spread extremely fast in this jam-packed world, sometimes fulfilling the wildest fantasies of the secret agents. The obsessions, delusions, and blatant lies of the services, in the end, bring the historian nearer to an understanding of the workings of the Communist system than contemporaries would have suspected.

I know or knew the majority of the protagonists of this book. I know them and I knew or might have known their parents and grandparents, and they know or knew or might have known each other well, too well. I know the victims and their executioners too.

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Compression under State Socialism was not only spatial but temporal as well. Revolutions, regime changes in general, and Communist takeovers

in particular invite historical revision, past actions under new descriptions. New histories are made by category change. After revolutions—and revolutionary changes—as Thomas Kuhn has famously claimed, we live in a different world: “What characterizes revolutions is, thus, change in several of the taxonomic categories prerequisite to scientific description and generalization. That change, furthermore, is an adjustment not only of criteria relevant to categorization, but also of the way in which objects and situations are distributed among pre-existing categories.”⁴ A new distribution of historic objects—the events, the ideas, and the dead of the past—requires not only a certain number of possible new choices but—as Michel Foucault remarked—new excluded possibilities as well.⁵

In 1918 the Austro-Hungarian monarchy ceased to exist; in November, as a result of a bourgeois revolution, the republic was proclaimed that in March 1919 gave way to a Communist takeover—after the Soviet Union the second soviet regime in the world—which after 133 days was defeated by a right-wing, Christian, anti-Semitic, and chauvinist counterrevolution; as a consequence of the Trianon Peace Treaty, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and half of its population; the country became an ally of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany; Hitler gave back some of the lost territories while two hundred thousand people died at the Don River and more than five hundred thousand Jews and Roma were deported to and annihilated in the concentration camps; the country found itself once more on the losing side after the end of World War II; the Paris peace treaty ordered once again the amputation of the territory of the country; the Hungarian Germans and Slovaks were forced to migrate after the war; the Soviets deported hundreds of thousands to the gulags; in 1948 the Communists seized power and the enemies of the Communist state were hunted down, imprisoned, and executed; in 1956 the revolution broke out and was defeated, and was followed by severe reprisals and mass emigration; in 1968, after Hungary took part in the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the defeat of the Prague Spring, the last hope in the reformability of existing Socialism, with the utopia of “Socialism with a human face,” was lost (for the time being, forever). In 1989, without due forewarning, the

4. Thomas Kuhn, “What Is a Scientific Revolution?” in *The Probabilistic Revolution*, ed. Lorenz Krüger and Lorraine Daston, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 20.

5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), p. 380.

State Socialist regime, the party-state, together with the protecting iron curtain and the Berlin Wall, fell, and the country found itself once again in an unknown world.

After each turn Hungarians found themselves in a new world, living with a new past. Past actions under new descriptions required not only new taxonomic categories but also the inclusion (and naturally, the exclusion) of certain possibilities, that is, reactivated, until then excluded, left out, censored, forgotten events of the past. At any given moment history became foreshortened, retrospectively foreseen in a different way. The changed perspective created new continuities, new chronologies by exclusion, which in turn compressed the elapsed historical time. The new situations warranted newfangled historical contentions—Hungary’s historical or political mission in the Carpathian Basin, traditional cultural superiority over the neighboring ethnic groups, the centuries-long tradition of liberation movements, the historic role of the exploited underclasses, the iron laws of historical progress, historical necessity—and in the face of competing claims, coming from neighboring countries or from rival, defeated political groups, in Hungary, as in the rest of Central Europe, historical arguments have always been used in actual political wars. In fact, historical arguments have always been the *ultima ratio* in political battles. Historical figures, the dead, the favored dead, have always been our contemporaries. In this part of the world the dead, any dead, might resurface unannounced any moment. I know the dead from close up too; they are my contemporaries.

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If graves can (and sometimes should) be opened, if the solitude of the dead cannot be honored, if the past is not envisioned as being over yet, then the objects, the events, the ideas, and the dead of the past could be revisited and remake: not as doubles but as if each of them were the original, the real one. The object of my study is the *remake*: the remake of the dead, the martyr turned unknown soldier and back again, the criminal who is redeemed as innocent, holy days banalized, cemeteries restructured, and unremarkable figures presented as historical monstrosities, ordinary places rebuilt as sites of horror.⁶ My book is not devoted to traces of times gone by

6. “To give ourselves a past a posteriori, as if it were, a past from which we prefer to be descended, as opposed to the past from which we did descend” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unmodern Observations*, trans. Gary Brown, William Arrowsmith, and Herbert Golder [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990], p. 103).

or representations of past events, but to *phantoms*.⁷ It deals with bodies and objects that are presented as visibly, even tangibly, incarnate.

Instead of the notion of substitution, I study manipulation by hand: undoing by remaking. (Note: the Latin prefix *re* = back or again, in some cases has the same force as *un* in English; implying undoing of some previous action, like *recludere* = unclosed, open, or as in the case of *revelare*, meaning to unveil.) Each chapter of this book is offered to the story—in almost all cases to the stories—of a particular remake: the dead body, the name of the dead, the cemetery, the holy day, the criminal, the underworld, the funeral, the political transition.

Each part arcs over the Great Divide: 1989, the year of the Fall, of the interval (*promzbutok*), in the formulation of the Russian formalist theoretician, Yury Tynianov. In that year the past fell to pieces and became extinct.⁸ Millions, hundreds of millions of people in the former Communist world became lost; they lost their future because they lost their past. One morning—in Hungary it was exactly on June 16, 1989, the day of the reburial of the executed prime minister of the 1956 revolution—they woke up unsuspecting and found themselves in a brand new world, with all their certainties disappearing. History left no time for preparation, as it was not the people who undid the regime; History did it itself. (“This silent collapse—which is sometimes called ‘The Velvet Revolution’—has in all probability ruined something in the people, although it is difficult to know exactly what. What was gone was perhaps the ethos of resistance, which

7. “The phantom, created by a god in the semblance of a living person such as the one Apollo fabricates ‘like to Aeneas himself and in his armor. . . . It is a simulacrum now that the Greeks and the Trojans confront in battle, a figure that both sides are convinced is the hero in person’” (Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Psyche: Simulacrum of the Body or Image of the Divine?” in *Mortals and Immortals*, ed. and trans. Froma I. Zeitlin [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991], p. 186; see also chap. “Birth of Images,” pp. 164–85).

8. In 1988/1989, among other things, I was preoccupied, together with my students, members of a several-year-long seminar, with writing and editing a collection of texts related to the economic and social history of Socialism. By the time the book (*Gazdaság- és Társadalomtörténeti Szövegyűjtemény a Szocializmus Magyarországi Történetének Tanulmányozásához* [Economic and Social History Sources for the Study of the History of Socialism in Hungary], vols. 1–2 [Budapest: Aula, 1990]) was published in the spring of 1990 the cover of the book was printed with a diagonal black ribbon. By early 1990, the object of the book seemed to be dead. (Despite its untimeliness, I think it is still a good, although not a very useful, book.)

had given cohesion to a form of life, or it was an instance of hope that, although it had never been real hope, had nevertheless provided form and coherence to existence.”⁹

Gone were the certainties, the pillars of one’s life: the recurrent familiar events, the rhythm of life, the everyday and the holidays, the well-known street names, the social significance of neighborhoods, the meaning of the photographs in the family album, the social capital, the knowledge of Russian as a usable foreign language, the value of the sociometrical network of one’s private and professional world, the stability of memories, the comprehension of private and public history. What remained was unknown. At that point between the lost and the not-yet comprehended, historians, politicians, and professional and amateur self-proclaimed experts offered support: to remake the world. My book is a chronicle of the endeavor.

I am a fieldworker in Hungary, whose object of study is not the history of my country, which I know too well. Dealing with history is not a scholarly task for me; it is an existential undertaking. Hungary is just a particular and particularly suitable case that reveals not the deep structures of history but the possible available relations to the (perpetually remade) past. “Is not the narrow space, where we spend our everyday life, the symbol of all places, of the world, of life itself?”—once asked Imre Kertész, the Nobel laureate survivor of Fascism and Communism, who, in his own words, is a stranger everywhere, as being a stranger everywhere is unavoidable.¹⁰ I am not a stranger; I am at home here, in spite of everything.

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This book, in a sense, is a string of stories: dozens and dozens of loosely but deeply connected stories. The same protagonists, martyrs and villains, victims and executioners surface in the subsequent stages from different perspectives and under new descriptions. Each chapter is centered on deeply buried traces of the 1956 Revolution, although the subject of the book is certainly not the history of the revolution. My license to write history is my telling of stories. Weaving stories—by using finite structural elements—around the dead is a way to make them familiar. As they are my

9. Imre Kertész, “A Boldogtalan 20. Század” [The Unhappy 20th Century], in Imre Kertész, *A Száműzött Nyelv* [Exiled Language] (Budapest: Magvető, 2001), p. 35.

10. Imre Kertész, *Haza, Otthon, Ország* [Fatherland, Home, Country], in Imre Kertész, *A Száműzött Nyelv* [Exiled Language] (Budapest: Magvető, 2001), pp. 111 and 107, respectively.

contemporaries, I want to see them from up close. I cannot do this with the technique of defamiliarization, estranging, displacement (*sdvig*), a *modus operandi* that the Russian literary formalists, Viktor Shklovskii and Yury Tynianov among them, had learned, probably from Husserl.¹¹

The stories cover vast territories and thousands of years but not in quest of deep arch-structures. “The *Necronym*,” the second chapter of the book, is indebted to Wittgenstein’s notes in his “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” although I am definitively not looking for his “family resemblances,” or distant relatives.¹² As is so intimately familiar in the practice of writing history, I am dealing with death, with the dead. Death is the ultimate subject of the historian. I know: the dead are produced by differentiated practices; death is not a timeless universal category. (“We do not play chess with eternal figures in the world . . . ; the figures are but what the successive configurations on the playing board make of them”—as Paul Veyne remarked.)¹³ Each of the dead is mourned over in a slightly or grossly different way. Death, as we know from the Gospels, is not (just) a biological but a social and cultural fact and idea. Faced with the drama of death, we have no choice but to turn to the repertoire of available practices in order to turn the biological into an artificially slowed-down social process. As imperfectly related members of both temporarily and spatially large groups, we turn to a sort of common pool—the content of which is more or less preserved, although constantly altered, and transmitted by (often misperceived) sacred books, tales, myths, rudimentary practices—the existence of which is, for the most part, unknown to us. I tell these stories, coming from afar both in time and space, in the hope that they might shed light on those features of our contemporary practices that otherwise would have seemed strange or obvious, difficult to comprehend or trivial, complicated or just too simple to accept.¹⁴

11. On Shklovskii, and *ostranienie* (“defamiliarizing,” “estranging”) in his case, as a prehistory of a useful literary device, see Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 1–4.

12. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordham (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), pp. 119–55.

13. Paul Veyne, *Foucault révolutionne l’histoire*. In: *his Comment on écrit l’histoire suivi de Foucault révolutionne l’histoire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), p. 236.

14. “Historians and anthropologists most truly love their practice when they alternate constantly between the past and the present, the distant and the near, the immutable and the changing” (Alain Boureau, *Kantorowicz: Stories of a Historian*, trans. Stephen G.

The book starts with an autopsy and after several chapters, after a journey that leads to faraway places in time and locality, ends with a funeral. The book enacts the artificially slowed-down process between death and the final burial. It is a survey of the political technologies—taxonomies, categorization, and distribution: the making—of the dead. I often visit burial places, especially the oldest cemetery in Budapest with the graves and mausolea of the prominent dead. The place, in an attempt at retroactive justice, has changed considerably in the past decade. The visible efforts, the structures elevated above the earth, try desperately to find life in death, immortality in the corpse, justification in sacrifice. It is not only addition, new, mushrooming heroic structures one can encounter in the place of death but also exclusion, the empty sites left behind when bodies are removed. As if following the commandment of the Bible—“the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it” (Num. 35:33)—the newly found martyrs cannot rest in the vicinity of those who are chosen for being responsible for past catastrophes.

The process I have followed while working on this book was like the slow cleansing of a found object. The activity has not only revealed hitherto hidden qualities of the object but also gradually changed its nature as well. The object of my study—the dead as contemporary—exhibits, paradoxically, characteristics that make it analogous to what Ian Hacking termed “interactive kind.” While repeating the experiments, revisiting the cemeteries and the archives, scrutinizing the sources in the subsequent chapters, I have discovered hitherto-unknown features, which either had lain there buried before and came into light as a consequence of my manipulation, or became visible because I myself had become slightly different, more attentive, more sensitive as a result of my own activities. My work had a looping effect: recognizable both on the object and on myself.¹⁵

Nichols and Gabrielle M. Spiegel (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 108.

15. Hacking distinguished “interactive kinds” from “indifferent kinds”: “I do suggest that a cardinal difference between the traditional natural and social sciences is that the classification employed in the natural sciences are indifferent kinds, while those employed in the social sciences are mostly interactive kinds. The targets of the natural sciences are stationary. Because of the looping effect, the targets of the social sciences are on the move” (Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001], p. 108, esp. pp. 103–24). Hacking, however, does not mention the feedback, the impact of the classification on the scholar who is devising and employing the classification scheme.

The volume is a collection of concomitant fragments. Still, in the course of working on it, I had high ambitions: I wanted to make the world of State Socialism perceptible and to provide tangible experience about the life beyond the party-state. State Socialism is presented from the perspective of the Fall, while life beyond the party-state is shown as a prisoner of its prehistory. The book is both a prehistory of post-Communism and a post-*histoire* of Communism. It is an assemblage of fragments. Providing fragments, however, might be an appropriate way of presenting my history: "The human body could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments."¹⁶

Each chapter recounts a multitude of events; quite a few of them seem to be but coincidences. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines coincidence as "a notable concurrence of events or circumstances having no apparent causal connection." For the contemporaries of unfolding events, however, the lack of causal connection is not apparent either. Causal connection, or the lack of it, becomes visible usually only from the perspective of the endpoint of a particular chain of events. What the historian knows after the end was, in most cases, still unclear and uncertain for the contemporaries in the course of the emerging affair. By recording concurrent events, which, either for the contemporary actors or, later on, for the chronicler, sometimes lack apparent connections, the historian might be able to restore the uncertain, open quality of history as experienced *in eventum*.

Inference based on the close study of a set of events, of apparent historical coincidence, opens the way for what Charles Sanders Peirce called "abduction." Abductive or retroductive reasoning could be modestly, in a minimalist way, perceived as connecting observed surprising facts with other, supposedly relevant facts from different, even distant historical periods. In certain cases, however, for the latecomer, the historian, it might be promising to try to infer possible explanations from effects. Historical abduction thus may be imagined as—*posteventum*—inference from concurrent events to supposedly related—temporarily or spatially distant—incidents or sometimes, in the hope of constructive suggestion, even to probable cause(s).¹⁷

16. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 216–17.

17. "The very notion of a meaningful coincidence contains from the beginning a contradiction. It requires both chance and intention. Two things that happen at once

As the book is a record of historical remake, pasts in the making, as a secondary goal, I wanted to organize my work into a “register,” a “catalog,” a “list” of phenomena, useful, perhaps essential, for the work of a historian: the corpse; the relic; the name; the pantheon; the holy day; the courtroom; the underworld; the transition. Description and interpretation permeate each other.

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The book started to emerge, unnoticed, in the course of “Memory, Forgetting, and the Archive,” a graduate seminar cotaught with friends Stephen Greenblatt and Randy Starn in Berkeley. The course was then repeated in an altered format, as a road show, in the deep South, at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. At a memorable, and I can perhaps add, dramatic, conference, organized by the Getty Research Institute at the Warburg Library in Hamburg, the program of the book was presented in a condensed form.¹⁸ At the time of the conference Reinhart Koselleck was the Warburg Professor in residence of the library, and he attended all the seminars. He sat silently in a corner and after each session he made long, perceptive comments. Probably he too was not able to resist the truly dramatic impact of the symposium. In his comments he persistently used *wir*, we, when referring to Germans living under the Third Reich. On the third day, however, as if almost without prior intention, he changed to the third-person plural: *sie*, they.

The first part of the manuscript was written at Stanford, at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, where I had the good fortune to have regular conversations with the biochemist Paul Berg, who

become such a coincidence only when two criteria are met; logic must dictate the event as purely accidental, but the simultaneity must nevertheless tempt one to assume some more remote, mysterious connection between them. Pure chance does not make for a portent; rather, chance must be combined with an uncanny sense of meaningfulness that underwrites the happening” (Peter T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Text* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004], pp. 94–95).

When historians try to follow Epimenides’ example, “who made revelations not on future things, but on things past, things invisible,” then they experience the sense of meaningfulness in what otherwise might seem to be pure contingency (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 3.17.1418A.24).

18. Published as “Covering History,” in *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2001).

widened my horizon by patiently explaining the biochemical, neurological, and genetic mechanisms behind the working of memory.

I am indebted to my graduate students at Berkeley and at the Central European University in Budapest, most of them from former Communist countries; to close friends, Carlo Ginzburg and Thomas Laqueur among them, who accompanied me on long walks in the cemeteries in Budapest; to Sorin Antohi, Imre Barna, Paul Berg, Carla Hesse, Peter Kenéz, János Kis, Gábor Klaniczay, András Mink, Al Rieber. On different occasions I benefited from comments made by Saul Friedlander, Tony Judt, Marilyn Young, and Hayden White. Ildikó Csikos and Katalin Dobó provided valuable assistance. Without Judit Szira's insistence, the book would not have been finished.

I am especially grateful to my institution and to my colleagues at the Open Society Archives. While I was working on this book we built an archive together, which by today has become one of the most important cold-war archives in the world: it has the richest source collection on the history of Communism and probably the most interesting collection of human-rights documents. Writing the book and building the archives, the primary source for my book, were parallel activities.

There is a figure whose shadow is behind each chapter of this book: Imre Nagy, the executed prime minister of the 1956 Revolution, the martyr of his Communist utopia with a human face. Only after having finished the book and almost the introduction as well, did I realize that I had not referred to his political biography, arguably one of the most important Hungarian historical works of the past decade, the decade after the transition.¹⁹ It is not the life but the death of the martyred prime minister that hovers behind my study; not so much the body as the corpse. The dead are not fictitious characters in this book.

[As a prisoner of war, Nagy became a Communist in the Soviet Union (although formally he became a member of the Bolshevik Party only in 1920). He fought in the Red Army, and later on, he was accused of having taken an active part in the execution of Czar Nicolas II and his fam-

19. János M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre, Politikai Életrajz* [Nagy Imre, A Political Biography], vol. 1, 1896–1953; vol. 2, 1953–1958 (Budapest: Institute of the 1956 Revolution, 1996 and 1999).

ily.²⁰ He came back to Hungary, worked in and for the party, and from 1930 to 1944 he lived in the Soviet Union, where he received Soviet citizenship. He was expelled from and readmitted to the party, lost his job, and for a short time was imprisoned. Probably in the early 1930s he found himself entangled in the web of the Stalinist secret services and, having no choice, presumably cooperated with them. He most likely played a role in the imprisonment and tragic fate of some Hungarian Communist émigrés in Stalin's Soviet Union, among them Lajos Magyar, the noted Sinologist, who first made use of the term "Asiatic way of production."²¹

At the September 1, 1989, meeting of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the last secretary general informed the members of the Central Committee about the content of a dossier that General Kriuchkov, the head of the KGB, had sent a few days before.²² (There are good reasons to conclude that it was the Hungarian party leadership that had asked for the dossier to be prepared, around the time of Nagy's reburial in June 1989.) On the basis of the documents received, the last secretary general of the party accused Nagy of having worked as an agent of the Soviet secret services and of having been personally responsible for the imprisonment and eventual execution of dozens of innocent Communists. The dossier, together with original and forged documents, contained a list that Nagy had prepared in April 1939 in Moscow with 150 names. At least every fifth person on the list had a family member in prison, in the Gulag, on his or her way to the gallows. This was a list of Nagy's personal acquaintances, not a willful denunciation report prepared

20. See Elisabeth Heersch, *Nicolaus II. Feigheit, Lüge und Verrat. Leben und Ende des letzten russischen Zaren* (München: Langen Müller, 1992). The accusation has been repeated several times since, among other publications, in *Krasnaia Kabbala* (Red Kabala), an anti-Semitic pamphlet published in Moscow in 1992. Rainer denies the reliability of the accusations, although it seems plausible that prisoners of war, former soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army, took part in the execution (Cf. Rainer, *Nagy Imre*, vol. 1, p. 54).

21. I still eat with a silver spoon that as a small child I received from Magyar's former wife, the famous actress, Max Reinhardt's one-time beautiful lover Blanka Péchy. She was a good friend of my mother's, and after my birth, she gave the spoon to me. It once belonged to her son, who had been shot down as a fighter pilot in the Red Army during World War II. His name was István too; it is engraved on the silver spoon.

22. Cf. Károly Grósz's speech at the September 1, 1989, meeting of the Central Committee, in *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei* [Protocols of the 1989 Meetings of the Central Committee of the Hungarian

by an agent. Still, at one of the last meetings of the Central Committee, before the eventual collapse of the regime, Nagy was charged with direct collaboration in the perdition of dozens of innocent victims. The charges were echoed in the international press and also in scholarly publications.²³

Imre Nagy came back from the Soviet Union at the end of 1944 and became a member of the first government as minister of agriculture; he was the minister who signed the land decree that parceled out the large estates among the Hungarian peasantry; he became the speaker of the parliament and held different governmental positions; he was expelled from the party for “right-wing deviation,” then readmitted; after Stalin’s death, the Soviets chose him as the prime minister in June 1953; he was ousted at the beginning of 1955; he was fired from the party once more; he taught agricultural economics at the University of Economics in Budapest; on the evening of October 23, 1956, on the demand of the tens of thousands of demonstrators in front of parliament, he appeared on the balcony of the parliament and became the prime minister of the revolution. In the early morning hours of November 4 he took refuge in the building of the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest. He was deviously kidnapped—despite written guarantees—and held under house arrest in complete isolation in Romania, where he wrote a diary. He was brought back to Budapest in April 1957 and, after long interrogations, was put secretly on trial on February 5, 1958. Then the trial was postponed until June 9. On June 15, 1958, he was sentenced to death. Early the next morning Imre Nagy, together with two of his fellow prisoners, was hanged. He was buried in the courtyard of the prison.]²⁴

I also know Imre Nagy, in a way. During the closed and secret trial a film was shot—altogether about forty thousand meters—in the hope that an edited version could be used as propaganda material after the execution. Two edited versions were made, a longer one-hundred-minute one, and

Socialist Workers’ Party], ed. Anna S. Kosztricz and János Lakos, vol. 2 (Budapest: Hungarian National Archives, 1993), pp. 1514–18.

23. See Johanna Granville, “Imre Nagy, aka ‘Volodya’—a Dent in the Martyr’s Halo?” *Cold War International Project Bulletin* 5 (spring 1995): 28–37.

Rainer, after careful and persuasive analysis, and weighing all the circumstances, provides a balanced assessment. See Rainer, *Nagy Imre*, vol. 1, pp. 199–212.

24. The secret documents of the trial were kept in a strongbox in the office of János Kádár, Nagy’s executioner, ruler of Hungary between the defeat of the revolution and 1988. Only after his death in July 1989 and the collapse of his party in the same year was the safe opened.



FIGURE I.I. Imre Nagy in front of his judges, June 1958. From the never-released film made by the secret police. Open Society Archives, Budapest.

later on, an eighty-minute version. In 1961, on the secret orders of the Ministry of Interior, the films, except for a few copies of the eighty-minute version, were destroyed. My archives somehow acquired a copy of the film, which to this day—with one exception—has never been publicly shown.²⁵ I saw the film more than once and showed it to the writer Árpád Göncz, president of Hungary between 1990–2000 and a former convict of the 1956 Revolution, whose death sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Göncz translated Faulkner in prison. The sight of the emaciated, bespectacled defendant, looking significantly older than his age, with a squared exercise book in his hand, constantly making notes, writing in pencil, listening attentively as if he were participating in an academic debate, lecturing in a quiet, professorial voice, using simple, logical arguments to the court, behaving as if he were really standing before an institution of justice, who, during the whole show, did not implicate any of his fellow defendants, deeply shook the president of the republic too. (See Figure I.I.)

25. In the “House of Terror” (see related discussion in Chapter 6, below), the house of horrors devoted to the crimes of Communism, there is a room dedicated solely to the

My only consolation in this situation is that, sooner or later, the Hungarian people and the international working class will acquit me of those heavy accusations, the weight of which I have to carry now, in the consequence of which I have to give my life but the responsibility for which I have to take. I feel that the time will come when, in a calmer atmosphere, with clearer vision, with a better knowledge of the facts, justice could be administered in my case too. I feel I am the victim of a grave mistake, the mistake of the court. I do not ask for pardon.

These were his last words.

viewing of the film, in order to implicate Imre Nagy's fellow defendants, most of them former Communists as well, who admitted the fabricated charges.