

Chapter V

Four Historiographies in the Context of the Region

Every characteristic discussed above with respect to select Marxist historiographies also applies, to different degrees, to other countries in the region which I did not discuss in this work. The most obvious similarities pertain to structural and organisational aspects, as pointed out by Rafał Stobiecki.⁹¹⁹ After the war, the Party's educational institutions were established in every East Central European Communist country. Their goal was to prepare future Marxist teaching staffs. Some of the older institutions were universally dismantled and replaced with new entities, Marxist from the ground up. The same methodological grounds often led to analogous conclusions. Finally, Stalinist history-writing everywhere "treated as its main goal the elimination of all other, competing methods of writing history."⁹²⁰ All of these traits perfectly illustrate the theoretical similarities among various Stalinist historiographies. If anything, the idea of blaming the Stalinist system for the drive toward centralisation seems less compelling – not because there was no such connection, but more for the fact that, in the postwar world, similar phenomena transgressed the boundaries of political blocs. After the war, centralisation was accepted as the proper course of scientific development by non-Communist scientists as well.⁹²¹

Next to general characteristics shared more or less widely across Communist countries, one could name a few more specific traits, pertaining not only to the structures, but also to the content of historical analyses. The onset of Stalinism sparked the typically short-lived domination of Marxist interpretations of national histories that were strident in their criticism of the traditional perspectives. Mihail Roller's history of Romania, first published in 1947, rejected the idea of the nation as a subject of historical research and focused on the history of the territories of postwar Romania. Instead of tracing the achievements of rulers of Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania, it concentrated

919 Rafał Stobiecki, "Stalinizm w historiografii. Między radzieckim oryginałem a narodowymi kopiami," *Zeszyty Wiejskie* 2002.

920 Ibidem, 238.

921 Ibidem, 243.

on uncovering the history of peasant involvement in class warfare, with scant regard for nationality, while also underlining the ties between the people of Romania and Slavic folk and culture. The unification of the nation, writes Lucian Boia, is no longer perceived as a natural outcome of history and an unquestionable right of the Romanian nation, instead being framed as an imperial type of expansionism.⁹²² Roller completely ignored the formation of “Greater Romania” in 1918.

In no other case of which I am aware did the relapse of interwar “internationalism” in historiography reach as far as it did in Romania of the 1950s. Fairly early on, Bulgarian Marxists began to include the national revival among their progressive traditions, a fact Roumen Daskalov links with the shifting of perspective from class to state.⁹²³ Hungary was also quick to produce a list of supposedly progressive historical figures. The dominant ‘national-Communist’ interpretation of Hungarian history was in many respects similar to that of Czech and Slovak history. The place of the ‘progressive’ anti-feudal revolutionary movement of the Czech Hussites or of the Slovak miners was occupied in early modern Hungary by the 16th century’s György Dózsa uprising. The reproduction of the *kuruc*⁹²⁴ narrative influenced the Marxist-Leninist picture of Habsburg rule over Hungary and of the Hungarian gentry who had opposed it. The anti-Habsburg uprisings of Imre Thököly (1672–1685) and Ferenc Rákóczi (1703–1711) were labelled as part of the ‘progressive heritage’ even though their ‘class character’ was ambiguous. Moreover, the ‘Jacobin’ conspiracy of Ignác Martinovics in the late 18th century attracted similar assessments. The peak of the continuous struggle for national and social liberation was the 1848–1849 revolution, with its undisputed leaders Lajos Kossuth and the Romantic poet Sándor Petőfi. Finally, after hundreds of years of misery and exploitation from time immemorial to the end of the First World War, the chain of Hungarian progressive traditions found its culmination in the 1919 Soviet Republic. Interestingly enough, this state was associated with the postwar ‘Hungarian Stalin,’ Mátyás Rákosi, rather than with its factual leader Béla Kun (who had been executed at Stalin’s behest in the 1930s).

The attainment of an agreement between the new, Marxist interpretation and the national tradition was crucial not only for society at large, but also for the elites. For Gyula Szekfű, a conservative historian who “converted” to Marxism and, between 1945 and 1948, even became the Hungarian ambassador in

922 Boia, *History and Myth*, 71-2.

923 Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans. Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival*, Budapest 2004, 245-246.

924 The Hungarian term *Kuruc* refers to the denomination of anti-Habsburg Hungarian rebels in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Moscow, ideological transformation was rooted in the belief that Communism did not actually stand in opposition to the nationalist convictions he professed.⁹²⁵ Though some changes to the dominant interpretations of Hungarian–Slavic coexistence in the Carpathian basin appeared, the hegemonic Communist narrative was largely shaped by the interpretations of two historians, József Révai and Aladár Mód. Both authors “presented an unholy mixture of superpatriotic *kuruc* and proletarian-internationalist historical analyses.”⁹²⁶ Thus the jump from the postwar vision of history to the Stalinist one proved less dramatic in Hungary than in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The postwar period had seen an attempt at uniting the ‘revolutionary’ with the ‘national’ even at the cost of reproducing explicitly nationalistic interpretations.

Outside of Romania, the national “nihilism” of Marxist historiography (which the Romanian scholars of today tend to downplay)⁹²⁷ was exhibited only briefly and/or unconvincingly. Still, Roller’s interpretation possessed another trait which we can easily ascribe to most Communist historiographies – an emphasis on the role which Slavs, especially from the East, played in the histories of particular countries. Mihail Roller belittled the linguistic influence of Latin, which had been so obvious to earlier (and later) Romanian historians, and he did not set it against Dacian traditions (which would characterize his contributions to the traditional Romanian historical debates). Instead, he underlined the role of the Kievan Rus’ that had been responsible for laying the foundations for Romanian-Russian friendship.⁹²⁸ Bulgarian Marxists concentrated on the Russian theme when criticising their “bourgeois” predecessors, accusing them of shrugging off Bulgarian-Russian ties, and even of negating the Slavic character of the Bulgarian nation and culture.⁹²⁹

All Marxist historiographies suffered from similar organisational issues that had resulted from objective problems posed by collective work on a mass scale. For this reason, delays in publication of Marxist syntheses of national histories were hardly exceptional. The achievement of significant scholarly output, both in numbers and in quality, demanded the cooperation of non-Marxist historians. This point is vividly illustrated by representative Communist addresses to their

925 Irene Raab Epstein, *Gyula Szekfű. A Study in the Political Basis of Hungarian Historiography*, New York 1987, 305.

926 István Deák, “Hungary,” *The American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 1054.

927 As did Cristina Petrescu, for instance, during the conference *Die Historische Nationalismusforschung im geteilten Europa, 1945-1989: Politische Kontexte, institutionelle Bedingungen, intellektuelle Transfers*, March 28th, 2008 in Prague.

928 Boia, *History and Myth*, 108.

929 Marin Pundeff, “Bulgarian Historiography 1942-1958,” *American Historical Review* 1961/3, 683.

“bourgeois” colleagues. In 1949, the Hungarian Marxist, Erzsébet Andics, made an undisguised appeal for help by observing that, without the aid of non-Marxist scholars, victory in the “battle for the 5-year plan” would prove impossible.⁹³⁰ Members of the Bulgarian Communist Party drew similar conclusions when the first “draft” of the university history textbook proved so inadequate that the aid of non-Party historians appeared indispensable.⁹³¹

Romanian historiography differed also in this regard, as Mihail Roller not only questioned the traditional historical interpretations of the state and the nation, but also seemingly monopolised the 1950s book market. This was an isolated example of a “Bolshevik” historiography which actually rejected “national” values for the sake of class consciousness and internationalism, coupling ideological shifts with an unprecedented (outside the Soviet Union) postwar purge of historians.⁹³² In other cases of which I am aware, Marxist historians based their interpretations on older elements, harking back to the traditions of national historiography, including Marxism-Leninism and pro-Russian pronouncements only to a varying degree.

For many Marxist historiographies, the end of Stalinism marked the return of nationalism. As Ulf Brunnbauer claims, this process was particularly intense in Bulgaria and Romania, or, in states where the Stalinist interpretation was comparatively the most distant from previous traditions. The publication of Marx’s works, which included positive assessments of the Romanian national movement and harsh criticisms of Russia, sparked a decisive paradigm shift, leading to the rehabilitation of the prewar historiography. After a relatively short period of liberalisation, the increasingly oppressive Ceaușescu regime suppressed a reinterpretation of the Marxist doctrine that had been inspired by the *Annales* school: “While only the devoted party historians would go to nationalist extremes, and most historians worked on ideologically less charged topics, almost all Romanian historians dealt exclusively with Romanian history, and stressed the role of the Romanian state which contributed to the party’s historical vision.”⁹³³ Romanian and Bulgarian historiography of the 1970s

930 Balázs Németh, *Nationalism and Socialist Patriotism in the Hungarian Historiography between 1948 and 1956, and Its Influence on the Post-1956 Era*, MA thesis defended at the Institute of History of the CEU in Budapest, 1995 (holdings of the CEU Library), 8.

931 Pundeff, “Bulgarian,” 683.

932 Alexandru Zub, “Romanian historiography under communism,” in: *Culture and the Politics of Identity in Modern Romania, May 27-30 1998 Bucharest* (manuscripts of the presentations found in the CEU Library in Budapest), 2-3.

933 Ulf Brunnbauer, “Historical Writing in the Balkans,” in: *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, vol. 5: Historical Writing since 1945*, eds. Axel Schneider, Daniel Woolf & Ian Hesketh, Oxford 2011, 361.

exhibited a symptomatic interest in dubious theories concerning the ethnogenesis of the respective nations within dynamically developed and politically supported studies on ancient Dacians and Thracians.

At the risk of oversimplification, one could claim that the political changes caused by Stalin's demise had a lasting and positive effect on the development of historiography in only two countries of the Eastern Bloc – Poland and Hungary. In the changed climate, the path was cleared for a reconnection with the international historical community. And this time 'international' did not necessarily mean Western, since Stalinism had not only eliminated professional communication with Western historical scholarship but also had handicapped cooperation between countries within the Soviet bloc. It is telling that the first significant multilateral meeting of East Central European Marxist historians took place as late as 1953 during the congress of Hungarian historians in Budapest. In 1955 delegations from Eastern Europe, including the biggest Soviet delegation, took part in the congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (CISH) in Rome. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that Polish and Hungarian scholars 'caught up' with the most influential and promising Western current of historical thought, the *Annales* school. Through unofficial, personal ties, such Polish authors as Witold Kula, Tadeusz Manteuffel, Aleksander Gieysztor, Andrzej Wyczański, Bronisław Geremek, and Marian Małowist were not only inspired by Fernand Braudel and his colleagues and students, but also started to honour this intellectual debt by delivering a comprehensive analysis of the development of capitalism in East Central Europe. This applied to Kula above all, whose theses concerning Eastern Europe were included in Braudel's panoramic history of capitalism. Similar research agendas were realised in the works of György Ránki, Iván Berend, Péter Hanák, and Jenő Szűcs. Along with these developments, a generation of researchers born in the late 1920s and early 1930s arrived on the scene, bringing with them new topics and interpretations. Under the influence of Kula, a research centre for Polish social history was formed at the Institute of History in the Polish Academy of Sciences. Impulses coming from economic history stimulated the growth of further research fields such as the history of ideas, mentalities, and cultural history. Later on, this intellectual ferment sparked the formation of the so-called Warsaw school of the history of ideas (with Jerzy Jedlicki, Andrzej Walicki, Jerzy Szacki, Bronisław Baczek, and Leszek Kołakowski). Both in Poland and in Hungary, the liberal directors of the historical institutes of the national academies (Zsigmond Pál Pach and Tadeusz Manteuffel) supported new, ambitious research programmes. The main research topic of the period has both a symbolic and ironic meaning: in East Central Europe, the Stalinist narrative of progress was replaced by a focus on the backwardness of the region. Both Marxist historiographies

cooperated in a number of bilateral joint conferences and meetings, debating the backwardness of the region in historical perspective (with the notion of ‘backwardness’ masked by euphemistic descriptions, such as the ‘Prussian course of agricultural development’).⁹³⁴

The period that witnessed the most dynamic development in Polish and Hungarian historiography, the 1960s, lies beyond the chronological boundaries of this volume. It also does not consider the stable and fully controlled situation of East German historiography or the fleeting liberalisation and re-Stalinisation of historiography that followed the invasion by the Warsaw Pact states (including the GDR and Poland) – of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Still, the fact that Marxist historiographies in some countries of the Eastern Bloc managed to exploit the favourable political situation and create works of real value is significant. After all, it shows that Marxism had the potential for liberating historical discourse from the dichotomy of national and revolutionary values ubiquitous in the 1950s.

In spite of a declared breakthrough and innovative intentions, the Marxist concepts of national history, whether “optimistic” or “pessimistic,” remained tied to existing traditions of historical thinking. The new paradigm did not take root. No “Bolshevisation” of historiography occurred – instead, in some cases, it was trivialised. Still, disadvantageous changes resulted from the manner of scientific conduct, the pursuit of a single, canonical perspective on every problem, rather than from any antipathies toward various elements of the history of Poland, Germany, Slovakia or Bohemia. In other words, it had been an attempt to force historians into active participation in a myth, or into partaking in the formation of a myth. Time showed that Marxist historiographies quite often “conserved” traditional interpretations, deeming them Marxist and defending their “purity” from any kind of criticism.

The comparison of several Marxist historiographies in terms of their attitude toward national traditions compels us to modify or reject some of the claims raised toward each of them. Starting with Poland, it seems that the thesis about the anti-nationalist nature of Stalinist historiography cannot be supported. While several more or less “national” interpretations competed within Marxist historiography, there was no established “anti-national” pattern (barring the elements of Polish native traditions which collided with Russian traditions, of course). The schematicism of Marxist historiography did not consist in the

934 Emil Niederhauser, *Eastern Europe in Recent Hungarian Historiography* (Budapest, 1975).

imposition of a previously framed interpretation, but rather in the acceptance of a singular perspective as unquestionably binding in every particular case. Whether that perspective was “national” or “anti-national” was of secondary importance, never a point of view established beforehand. One could, of course, always claim that science done in this way was antithetical to the Polish historiographic tradition (and the claim would largely prove to be true), but the same model was applied in every other people’s democracy, even in countries where “national” values were seemingly treated with more reverence than in Poland. Similar statements about Marxism’s anti-national intentions in historiography are currently made also by Slovak historians, though the supposed anti-Slovak tendency of Marxist historiography in question is frankly untraceable. At the same time, I believe that schematicism was far more detrimental to the historiographies discussed here than the potential “anti-national” reinterpretation of the history of Poland or Slovakia would have been, since it limited the freedom to form any – national or anti-national – competing interpretations.

I counter claims about a breakthrough and rupture in the continuity of Polish and Slovak historiography with the model discussed herein, where the theory of formations, alliance with the Soviet Union, and aversion toward the Church acted as a scaffolding upon which historians could raise new Marxist visions of national history. The gaps in this scaffolding were filled for the most part with older, traditional interpretations, which thereby became, in a way, Marxist. This content, the evaluation of particular elements of national histories, remained somewhat shaky. That is, guidelines for deciding what was and was not “progressive” were missing.

Several Czech historians are inclined to note the virtues of past, Marxist historiography, in its relatively positive attitude toward national traditions. One can find statements extolling the merits of particular Marxists (Zdeňek Nejedlý being the most prominent example) in “defending” Palacký, Havlíček-Borovský, or other remnants of national traditions supposedly threatened with “Stalinisation.” I cannot fathom any virtue in such a schematic, petrified historiography, which stifles all attempts at producing an alternative – “rightist” or “leftist” – reading of historical traditions. As was the case in Poland and Slovakia, the growing “nationalisation” or “Bolshevisation” of Czech Marxist historiography was merely a byproduct (and not necessarily final, at that) of a specific model of science. Assessments of particular national heroes, uprisings, national movements, and so forth, could change without shifting the foundations and mechanisms of Marxist historiography, fitting squarely within its logic. Comparing these few examples, I am led to believe that no national values, however defined, were endangered, but the quality of thinking about history, which, I am quite certain, does not count as a national value.

I believe that a comparison of several Marxist historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe also raises doubts concerning the German research model quite commonly applied to the study of historiography in the GDR, which repeatedly connects it with West German historiography and politics. It is clear as day that the East German vision of history contains many aspects which become intelligible only in comparison with other countries of the Eastern bloc. Meanwhile it relates to West German historiography only very superficially. Structural connections, evident in comparison to Polish, Czech or Slovak historiography, derive from the fact that East Central European historiographies (and histories) plainly represent the best mutual context. After all, they are tied together by shared traditions of writing about history (with an enormous role played by German historical sciences as the originator and transmitter of methodological ideas), post-1945 geopolitics, and obligations to submit to identical political pressures. This comparison does not exhaust all the virtues of setting the GDR against its Eastern neighbours; one should also take into account the vivid interactions between historians from East Germany and Poland, Bohemia or Slovakia, often tasked separately with fashioning Marxist interpretations of the same events and historical figures. Through their works, historians from the GDR engaged in a dialogue with their colleagues from Poland, the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia, while their connections to West Germany went through prolonged dry periods, when one side or the other had little to say to the other side.

To summarize, we should re-emphasize the most general conclusion of my work – the claim that there was a multithreaded continuity of content and form before and after the so-called methodological breakthrough, regardless of institutional changes, and a particularly catastrophic change in the manner of conducting scientific debates. Earlier, pre-Marxist concepts did not curl up and die, but were rather absorbed into Marxist historiography. They were then revived bit by bit – usually incognito – in Marxist interpretations. Marxist historiographies of the Stalinist period owed great debts to preceding schools of thought far more thoroughly than might appear from reading the manifestos of the “methodological breakthrough.”