

1956 in the American Mind

Glant, Tibor. *Remember Hungary 1956: Essays on the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence in American Memory*. New York: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 2007. 246 pp. Glant, Tibor. *Emlékezzünk Magyarországra – 1956: Tanulmányok a magyar forradalom és szabadságharc amerikai emlékezetéről*. Budapest: Kiss József Könyvkiadó, 2008. 318 pp.

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The Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1956 is one of the most important historic events of the 20th century for us, Hungarians. And it is definitely the one that is the most significant if we consider its impact on the public opinion worldwide, including the United States. The Revolution was one of those few occasions when all eyes were set on a small country in the center of Europe, Hungary. For many Americans this was the first major international crisis that they were able to follow on television, and the way the Soviet army crushed the revolution revealed the true nature of Communism for those who had not been aware of it earlier. Until the fall of Communism in Hungary and Eastern Europe the official interpretation of the Revolution was a distorted one, and was used to legitimize the regime. The memory of the Revolution and War of Independence could be put into its proper place only after those who defined themselves in opposition to it were finally out of power. But how did people remember the hot Hungarian October of 1956 in other countries? In his book *Remember Hungary 1956: Essays on the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence in American*

Memory Tibor Glant explores the issue of the American memory of the Hungarian Revolution.

Among all the events of Hungarian history the Revolution and War of Independence of 1956 is the one that made the greatest impact on the collective memory of the United States. Surely this is the most widely researched segment of the history of Hungarian-American relations. But *Remember Hungary 1956* is the first effort to examine the extent to which the Revolution of 1956 is embedded in the American mind. It is a collection of five separate essays, connected by the common subject—the English language memory of the Revolution of 1956. The author of the essays is Tibor Glant, who is associate professor at the University of Debrecen, and the Chair of the North American Department. The subject fits into one of his main research topics, which is Hungarian-American relations in the twentieth century. The foreword to the book was written by István Deák, who is Seth Low Professor Emeritus at Columbia University. Deák is a Hungarian-American himself, a historian who is interested mainly in the history of Central Europe.

The present review discusses both the Hungarian and the English language editions of the book. There are some slight differences between the two, inasmuch as there are certain sections that are missing from the English edition, mainly for obvious chronological reasons. The English version was published first in 2007, by the Columbia University Press. The research was funded by the Remember Hungary 1956 Committee as a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. The Hungarian edition, *Emlékezzünk Magyarországra, 1956: Tanulmányok a magyar forradalom és szabadságharc emlékezetéről*, was published a year later in 2008 as a modified and revised version. As by this time the celebrations were already over Glant could also recount the events of the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution. There are two other dissimilarities: a short introduction was added to the beginning of each chapter in the Hungarian version, and the appendix was also altered. Apart from the differences listed above the Hungarian and the English editions of the book are basically identical.

The book is not a review of the historiography of the Revolution of 1956, the focus is wider. It examines and discusses various aspects of collective memory. In both the Hungarian and the English language the short preface and the acknowledgements are followed by the introduction. In the preface Glant explains how the idea of writing the book occurred to him, and explains the methods that he used. Each essay deals with a

particular aspect of the main branches of collective memory which, according to Glant, are the media, political memory, academic memory, literature, and fine arts. He acknowledges that because of the limits of the research he had to confine himself to various smaller segments of these larger topics. The introduction is a written version of a lecture held by István Deák in Toronto in September 2006 on the revolutionary tradition in Hungary. While the Hungarian reader is probably aware of this background this short overview of Hungarian history is particularly useful for the non-Hungarian audience. It shows how the Revolution and War of Independence of 1956 fits into the revolutionary trends in Hungarian history and how it compares to previous uprisings and revolts.

The first chapter addresses the question of how the Revolution of 1956, its aftermath and its memory appeared in the American media. Tibor Glant chose to examine the historical database of one of the most widely read and renown American daily newspapers, *The New York Times*. His choice is explained by two facts. On the one hand *The New York Times* is among the five most important American newspapers, and out of these five it published the greatest number of articles about the revolution. On the other hand its approach to the Kádár regime and its representation of the Revolution were criticized by some Hungarian refugees in the United States. This fact in itself demonstrates an interesting aspect of collective memory. First, shortly after after the Revolution, *The New York Times* was hostile towards Kádár, the newly appointed Hungarian leader, and the Soviet occupation. Later, with the coming of *détente* and the normalization of the relations between the United States and Hungary, the tone of the paper also changed. To the dismay of the Hungarian-American community it spoke favorably about the developments in the People's Republic of Hungary and the leader of the country, János Kádár. The anniversaries of the Revolution were exceptions, on these occasions *The New York Times* retained the previous tone. Glant suspects that the editors must have had a dual agenda: they wanted to encourage the Hungarian reforms and to foster the loosening of ties with the Soviet Union on the one hand, and maintain Cold War rhetoric on the other hand.

Glant examined various kinds of articles, such as ones commemorating the Revolution at anniversaries, country profiles, the political coverage, editorials and letters to the editor, the human interest stories, with a special focus on Cardinal Mindszenty, and obituaries, reviews and political advertisements. The duality of the attitude of *The*

New York Times appeared in many of these articles. Sometimes the authors glorified the freedom fighters, some other times, maybe unwillingly, they seemed to accept and echo certain elements of the propaganda of the Kádár regime. These included suggesting that the refugees left Hungary during and after the Revolution only “in hope of a better life and a car” (Glant 2007, 6). Often the *Times* tried to present Kádár in a favorable light, for example by falsely claiming that he stood up against Moscow in opposition to the execution of László Rajk at the time of the purges (Glant 2007, 27). Some other times the revolutionaries were misrepresented. For example the *Times* could never acknowledge the fact that although he led an anti-Soviet revolution Imre Nagy always remained a devout communist (Glant 2007, 24). Besides their content Glant also examined the vocabulary of the articles, the terminology they used. The analysis demonstrates that the choice of words also reflected the duality of the attitude of *The New York Times*.

The next chapter deals with political memory, for which purpose Glant chose to analyze the memoirs of the diplomats who were assigned to Budapest during the period between 1956 and 1989, the Revolution and the fall of communism. Diplomatic relations between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of Hungary were at the lowest possible level, that of temporary *chargé d’affaires*, after the revolution was suppressed by the Red Army. They were raised to the ambassadorial level only ten years later, in 1966. From 1966 to 1989 eight American ambassadors succeeded each other in Budapest, out of whom four published their memoirs. Martin J. Hillenbrand, Alfred Puhan, Philip M. Kaiser and Robie Marcus Hooker Palmer were all ambassadors in very different situations, and they all interpreted the Revolution of 1956 and the Kádár regime in their own singular way. Glant chose to review these memoirs because the four ambassadors represent four completely different approaches towards the Revolution and the regime. The closer they were to 1956 chronologically the more emotional they were about the issue. Hillenbrand and Puhan served in Budapest when Cardinal József Mindszenty was still in the embassy. He sought refuge there at the American legation in 1956, and left what would then already be an embassy only fifteen years later, in 1971. It is obvious that his presence in the building as a living symbol of the Revolution made a great impression on those Americans who worked and lived there.

The third chapter of the book is the examination of the academic memory of the Revolution of 1956. This chapter contains the study that

was the initial project of Tibor Glant. It is a survey of information on the Hungarian Revolution in a number of college textbooks and other books that are widely used in history courses in college programs all across the United States. The textbooks that were selected can be grouped into six categories: Western Civilization, twentieth-century world history, twentieth-century European history, Russian and Soviet history, American foreign policy in the Cold War, and East and Central European history in the twentieth century and/or after 1945. There is a great degree of variation between these textbooks. Some attribute a greater importance to the Revolution while some only see it as a minor episode in the Cold War, some have valid information and some others come up with mistakes one would not expect from a college textbook. Obviously, each textbook approaches the topic of the Revolution from its own perspective. Usually the closer the focus of the textbook is to Hungary spatially and to 1956 chronologically the more elaborate and accurate its analysis of the Revolution is.

There were some common misconceptions that Glant encountered in almost every textbook he examined. To give a few examples almost every one of them claimed that the Soviet military intervention came as a response to the announcement of Imre Nagy that Hungary would leave the Warsaw Pact. In fact this happened the other way around, it was the Soviet attack that came first. Another common error is that many of the textbooks attribute the execution of Imre Nagy to the Soviets, while it was Kádár who insisted on it. In general Glant finds that the quality of the coverage of the Revolution in the books he examined was surprisingly low. He makes a valid point when he suggests that it is up to us, Hungarians, and especially Hungarian scholars, to help Americans revise their knowledge about the Revolution, to correct these misconceptions.

The literary genre that is most often associated with the Revolution of 1956 is poetry—still. That notwithstanding Glant chose to examine the English-language prose related to this historic event. The fact that his is the first attempt to overview this material is remarkable, especially if we consider the magnitude of this literature. He analyzed circa forty books, among them personal accounts of American journalists and Hungarian refugees, memoirs and family histories, novels, mysteries and juvenile fiction. Some of these works had been completely forgotten, but some others had become bestsellers, achieved commercial success and became relatively well-known, such as *The Bridge at Andau* or *In Praise of Older Women* (Glant 2007, 137). As far as the history of East and Central

Europe is concerned the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 seems to be one of the most favorite topics. The majority of these works was published either shortly after the 1956 Revolution, or in the early 1990s. The reasons for the first wave of publications are fairly obvious, while the second wave was the result of an increased interest in the region due to the political changes. It is gratifying to see that the Hungarian Revolution remains an interesting topic for Americans. Unfortunately, very few of these works are available for the Hungarian reader, most of them have not been translated to Hungarian. Also, it would probably be worthwhile to analyze some of these texts as works of literature.

The most interesting essay in the book is probably the one about Vice President Richard M. Nixon's refugee fact-finding trip to the Austrian refugee camps and its memory, the painting titled *Nixon at Andau* (or *Meeting at Andau*) by the Hungarian-American artist, Ferenc Daday. The general topic of this chapter is the representation of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in fine arts. The essay is an excellent case study. First the actual historical event is introduced then we can read about its artistic representation. We get a real insight into the way the collective consciousness works. Basically it was Daday that brought the trip of Nixon back to public memory. The work of art in question is the reproduction of an event that never happened, at least certainly not in the form that Daday painted it. But through an examination of the painting we can get to know a lot about the artist's perception of the Hungarian Revolution and the revolutionaries, and also about some of the stereotypes about them. We can see how the memory is manipulated through all these various images. A special and very unique feature of this chapter is the interview Glant made with the painter, through which we can gain interesting insight into the way Daday thinks about his work. It would really be appealing to read similar in-depth analysis of other works, too.

In the appendix of the English version of *Remember Hungary 1956* there is a sample of the various commemorative events that took place in the United States the year of the 50th anniversary of the Revolution. This was prepared by Professor Peter Pastor of Montclair State University, New Jersey. He enumerates the academic activities related to the celebrations, governmental proclamations commemorating the Hungarian Revolution and activities by the Hungarian-American communities. As it was already mentioned earlier the Hungarian version has a whole chapter dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary. In this edition the appendix contains

several lists related to the Revolution, including a bibliography of prose works on the subject, a list of North American dissertations in the topic, the academic memory of the 50th anniversary, and a list of statues and commemorative plaques.

The essay that is missing from the English edition, and that is the last chapter of the Hungarian edition, is about the 50th anniversary. It is a discussion of how each of the five branches of the collective memory: the media, politics, academy, literature and fine arts contributed to the celebration. We can conclude that special attention was given to the Revolution, it was commemorated in the press, in film, on billboards, by special political visits and proclamations, by publishing various books, with statues and commemorative plaques, and even with a computer game. We all know that the 50th anniversary had certain political implications in Hungary. This was not different in the United States either, there were many allusions to the contemporary political situation, attempts to link it to the American involvement in the Middle East. Many American politicians compared communist Hungary to Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

The events of the 50th anniversary also show that the memory of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence is still alive in the American collective memory. It was high time to start exploring the memories of the Revolution, especially as this is probably the most memorable event in Hungarian history for the Americans. Tibor Glant has started the work, but it is far from being over. There are many fields of remembering that have not been covered yet, including television, the Internet, several works of art, not to mention a literary analysis of the texts collected by Tibor Glant. *Remember Hungary 1956* is a reading that can be recommended to everybody who is interested in Hungarian-American relations or the Revolution of 1956.