HSCE | Historical Studies on Central Europe

Historical Studies on Central Europe 3, no. 2 (2023): 260–267
doi.org/10.47074/HSCE.2023-2.21

State Socialism in Eastern Europe. History, Theory, Anti-Capitalist Alternatives. Edited by Eszter Bartha, Tamás Krausz, and Bálint Mezei.

London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023. 356 pp. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22504-8

Róbert Takács
Institute of Political History, 11–13 Villányi út, 1114 Budapest, Hungary; takrobi78@gmail.com

State socialist regimes and historical alternatives

The volume edited by Eszter Bartha, Tamás Krausz, and Bálint Mezei is a collection of studies that encompass, at first sight, quite heterogenous topics, ranging from economic analysis through labor history to politics of remembrance. Not even the title, *State Socialism in Eastern Europe,* establishes real cohesion among the papers collected in the book. Some authors expand the investigation to the entire state socialist period, while others focus on shorter periods, such as the 1970s or the years of the transition.

The territorial focus of the volume is also somewhat blurred. The editors promise to embrace Eastern Europe, however, most of the studies analyze the region primarily through the Hungarian example. Except for one Russian case study, the term (East) Central Europe might therefore appear more appropriate, but while also citing Jenő Szűcs, who elaborated the characteristics of three different historical regions of Europe,[1] the editors prefer the concept of Emil Niederhauser, who differentiated between two characteristic development paths, Western and Eastern.[2] In this understanding of European development, Eastern Europe—a term that includes the Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian territories—highlights the importance of the state (absolutism, authoritarian government) during subsequent modernization efforts.

It is also worth taking a closer look at the subtitle *History, Theory, Anti-capitalist Alternatives*. Although only half of the authors are historians, as Attila Antal, Péter Szigeti, and György Wiener are legal and political scientists, while András Pinkasz

1 Szűcs, *Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról.*

2 Niederhauser, *Kelet-Európa története.*

and Tamás Gerőcs are economists, and Chriss Hann is a social anthropologist, they are all committed to the historical analysis of their subject. Their might diverge, but the demand for theoretical foundations and socio-critical thinking is a common denominator. This critical approach towards capitalism explains the research interest in the history of anti-capitalist experiments.

This reviewer, however, is inclined to highlight another expression from the subtitle: *alternatives*. Encountering dilemmas concerning historical—and political—alternatives is a common thread. In many of these papers, one can grasp the intellectual struggle to detect and examine alternatives to both capitalist and socialist development On the other hand, they also understand the history of the state socialist 'world' as an alternative—modernizing—project challenging capitalism. Some pose the question whether macro-level alternatives could have emerged at all (György Wiener, Tamás Krausz), while others add their contribution on the micro or local level (Chris Hann, Susan Zimmermann).

Furthermore, the authors tend to discuss alternatives in the frames of constraints and determinism. Depending on the characteristics of the region, which they define as the (semi)periphery of capitalism, these constraints determine which alternative was finally realized. For example, Péter Szigeti stresses that the state socialist alternative was not in itself doomed, but that its failure was a consequence of global economic changes. Speaking of alternatives, we should add that most of the authors do, did, or wanted to believe in a possible third—democratic leftist—alternative between capitalism and the existing state socialism. Opportunities for such a third way alternative appear most prominently during periods of storm and stress, in historical moments like 1968 or 1989.

Amongst the plethora of topics, two overarching perspectives avail themselves for interpreting the volume—one negative, the other positive. The negative dimension uniting these diverse papers is the refusal of adopting the concept of totalitarianism as productive for historical analysis. They consider it an ideologically driven approach (not) to understand state socialism, a product of the Cold War opposition. Also, as the "Introduction" emphasizes, this paradigm was challenged already in the 1970s by a group of diverse scholars usually listed under the banner of revisionist historians. These historians—e.g., Stephen Kotkin, Sheila Fritzpatrik[3], and others—strove to reintroduce society into the academic discourse about Soviet history and, therefore, to break with the simplistic dichotomy of oppressors and the oppressed, or in even more simplified terms, the mythological fight between good and evil. These authors did much to overcome such narratives and examine state socialist societies in their complexities and explain how these regimes could gain

3 See: Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*; Fritzpatrik, *Everyday Stalinism*.

public support, while others emphasized the existence and impact of individual attitudes and choices *(Eigensinn)* in dictatorships. Also, the editors make it clear that, during and after the transition, the totalitarian paradigm was highly welcomed by both rightist and liberal elites, who had earlier been—or defined themselves as—the opposition to Communist rule.

From a 'positive' perspective, we should emphasize the authors' thorough social critical approach and Marxist analysis of historical development. This is reflected not only by the names we most often encounter—for example Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polányi, besides the re-reading of Marx, Engels, and Lenin—, but also the most important years that are analyzed on the pages of the volume. These symbolic years that the authors anchor their argumentation on are 1953, 1968, and 1973 in particular. Naturally, the first two are also milestones related to foundational political events, but here the primary emphasis is on their economic relevance. 1953 is not only the year when Stalin died, which resulted in changes in party leadership and decision making, easing total party control over society, and a shift in Cold War struggle, in general the political side of de-Stalinization, but also—more importantly for the authors—departure from the much-discussed priorities and structures of Stalinist economic policy. This was characterized by the growing significance of light industry, establishing realistic targets for industrial growth, emphasizing qualitative development—all in all, a shift towards different distribution policies, or as the authors put it, an attempt at 'consumer socialism'. It is important to underline that the papers discuss 'consumer socialism' and not a socialist consumers' society, which would open a larger debate about the existence of the latter, given the limited scale and choices of consumption compared to the capitalist center. Nevertheless, the volume also highlights that people—including workers—of the Soviet bloc in fact started to compare their standards of living and the quality of consumers' goods to Western living conditions, which they were increasingly able do. Thus, the story of how state socialist regimes lost the ideological battle to define 'welfare' in a different, more complex way than income or abundance of consumer goods starts in 1953.

This process leads us to the second outstanding moment, 1968. This year is read differently in Hungarian, in Eastern European, and in Western historiography. Nevertheless, the time frame for discussing this moment of crisis and transformation can invariably be expanded to the 1960s. It is not specifically the events of the students' movement, but rather the Marxist renaissance of the sixties which is more important from the authors' perspective. In these years, the capitalist mainstream had to face a leftist intellectual challenge from the inside. In Hungary, the economic reform—the so-called New Economic Mechanism—was launched in January 1968, but from the middle of the decade onwards the quest for economic reform alternatives became a general phenomenon everywhere from Moscow to Prague. However, Budapest took the largest step towards reintroducing market incentives into macro

and micro levels of economic management, while Prague was the only capital to extend such experimentation to the domain of political reforms.

The New Economic Mechanism, which most authors touch upon, raises the question of the uniqueness of Hungarian development. The studies in the volume do not directly address this issue, and in many aspects emphasize the common features, problems, and challenges most Eastern European societies shared. However, it is exactly the economic reform—its survival and revival in the 1970s and 1980s—along which they seem to differentiate the Hungarian state socialist model from others, rather than based on its more liberal or less authoritarian political or cultural attitudes. This reviewer does not recall reading about the Helsinki Accords or the issues of civil rights in any of the studies, and cultural policy or its prominent—but, in Moscow, frowned upon—shaper, György Aczél is also hardly ever mentioned.

Let us take a closer look at one example that highlights the uniqueness of the Hungarian experience. In the first section called "A Third Road in Eastern Europe?", a unique feature of the Hungarian legal system is noted: in 1967, collective enterprises (to be exact, agricultural cooperatives) were given the same rights as state-owned companies. In the chapter "Front Matter," Tamás Krausz observes that, in the Soviet Union, such legal equality was only granted during Gorbachev's perestroika. The time gap is more than twenty years: what was introduced in the heydays of state socialism in Hungary only appeared in its final phase in the Soviet Union. The Hungarian economic reform was clearly a terrain that in the 1970s differentiated Hungary within the Soviet bloc—despite their common economic challenges like indebtedness, the struggle to gain and keep Western markets, the thirst for hard currency, etc.—, and which made Hungary a prime place to study economic alternatives for Wojciech Jaruzelski's Poland, Gorbachev's Soviet Union and Deng Xiaoping's China throughout the decade. Furthermore, this shared reformism, not only in the optimistic decade of the 1960s, but also in the crisis-ridden second half of the 1980s was one of the binding ties that, according to Csaba Békés, led to virtual coalitions within the Soviet bloc.[4] But Hungary was also a 'proving ground' for some Western scholars, among them leftist sociologists, anthropologists, and economists like Michael Burawoy and one of the authors, Chris Hann. Burawoy visited the steelworks of Diósgyőr (Miskolc), while Hann ended up in Kiskunhalas, not far from the Yugoslav border. They both came to study the Hungarian development for the same reasons as others: partly because of its uniqueness, and partly because they were allowed to. Nevertheless, these scholars were not antagonistic opponents of state socialism. On the contrary, Attila Antal argues that the Hungarian reforms actually fertilized the thinking of Western neoliberal economists.

---

4 Békés, *Enyhülés és emancipáció.*

Finally, let us not forget about the third crucial year, 1973, the oil crisis and its economic consequences, which appear as the almost mandatory starting point for the analysis of the transition for those who emphasize the impact of economic processes. It is an important turn that triggered the neoliberal and neoconservative breakthrough in the West while also causing economic slowdown and leading to, indebtedness, and the consequent failure of consumer socialism in the East.

Here we should emphasize two further central concepts of the volume: catching up and modernization. The authors interpret state socialism as an 'alternative' experiment to catch up with Western capitalism, in other words, as an alternative modernization model. In this regard, 1953 is not a sharp rupture, as the preceding Stalinist era had been characterized by the same deeper economic goals. What the post-Stalinist decades offered was a modified, adjusted quest for modernization, with the efforts becoming especially evident in the reformist thinking of the 1960s. In this interpretation, the incapability of catching up with Western capitalism led to their failure.

It is also worth noting the *longue durée* perspective of some of the studies, especially those of Tamás Gerőcs, András Pinkasz, and Attila Antal. Gerőcs and Pinkasz analyze the successes and failures of the so-called Hungarian 'bridge model' in the framework of dependency theories. The bridge model describes Hungary's dual economic integration to the Eastern state socialist world and to Western capitalist structures. It underlines the significance of 1973 and the economic processes of the 1970s, because these upheavals fundamentally rearranged the international economic context, therefore by the 1980s had rendered this bridge model unsustainable. Taking their inspiration from world-system theories, Gerőcs and Pinkasz also draw attention to the fact that, in this region, catching up was not solely a socialist project, but a continuous and never fulfilled program the semi-peripheries. From their perspective, the characteristics of the peripheries' dependence on the center offer a valid explanation for the failures of post-socialist catch-up efforts as well.

The same studies also draw attention to long-term processes leading to 1989: they do not regard the regime change as a rapid and unprecedented event but try to grasp the decades-long integration of the state socialist economies into the world economy, which was one of the factors that caused the failure of this alternative modernization effort. Attila Antal carefully documents that the transformation of the legal system had started well before the market-friendly laws passed in 1987–1988 (the introduction of value added tax, personal income tax, and the companies act). His study also contributes to our understanding of professional networks and transfers, which—he shows—were also possible between the East and the West in the Cold War era in such ideologically sensitive areas as economic policies. Moreover, Antal stresses that the flow of knowledge was not the one-directional

stereotypical West–East pattern: Western neoliberalism could also learn lessons from the Hungarian reform experience, most importantly the notion that the state can propel neoliberal change.

Two writings—the chapters by Susan Zimmermann and Eszter Bartha—discuss gender policies of the Kádár regime from different perspectives, but they both point out the contradictory nature of the emancipatory promises of state socialist regimes and the constraints of economic realities.

Susan Zimmermann's case study illustrates this dilemma through the regulation of women workers' nightshifts. The author unfolds a complex labyrinth of interests including conflicting trade union and industrial policies, foreign policy priorities, and constant pressure due to export goals for goods intended for western markets. Furthermore, she points out the hierarchies between male and female labor, skilled and unskilled workers, and explains relations with international non-governmental organizations.

Eszter Bartha utilizes interviews with male and female workers about their different levels of professional motivations and career objectives, which clearly underline the gender differences in work attitudes. Nevertheless, Bartha offers more than a sensitive gender analysis of her interviews with Hungarian workers: she also presents the sociological approaches that emerged during the state socialist period in Hungary, both those analysts who remained within the constraints of the official public sphere and those who stepped beyond these narrow realms of legality. She stresses that both these groups used class as the prime category or reference in their analysis, while even for dissident thinkers, gender remained marginal. Even the defenders of the official ideology failed to perceive gender as ideologically challenging Marxism–Leninism.

The two studies in the section called "System Change and the Alternatives" discuss questions of the economic transition. Tamás Krausz sharply focuses on the last years of the Soviet Union and analyzes the political debates of the late Soviet leadership. Unfortunately, this is a topic which has gone largely undiscussed in Hungarian historiography, despite the rich literature of the transition. Krausz concludes that the *perestroika* era concepts of economic and therefore social democratization, especially the workers' say in the direction of enterprises and workers' ownership, was not supported either by the nomenklatura elites or by the workers themselves. The standpoint of the first group was in line with their interests, as they were trying to transform political into economic capital and found out that privatization held out exactly this promise. On the other hand, workers, whose labor position and negotiating power were dramatically worsened by privatization, had little faith in to another socialist alternative. Chris Hann sketches the almost century-long development of Kiskunhalas from a traditional agricultural town to a post-socialist municipality.

He uses a term borrowed from Karl Polányi to interpret the processes after 1990 as 'disembedding' the economy from society.

The studies in the section called "The New Canon" offer a different perspective on state socialism. Slávka Otčenášová and Bálint Mezei examine post-1990 history school textbooks in Slovakia and Hungary, thereby exploring the politics of memory of East European post-socialism. Perhaps the authors could have reflected on each other in order to underline the impact of the different political dynamics of the state socialist development in these two countries: both Hungary and Czechoslovakia experienced a political explosion during the state socialist period that determined their later development. While following the Hungarian 1956 revolution, a more than three-decade long process led to practices of power directed towards reconciliation with Hungarian society, the 'normalization' of the Husak regime resisted political concessions even in 1989. This must have left its imprint on the genuinely liberal schoolbook policy in Hungary between 1990 and 2010, when schools were able to choose from several alternative textbooks. In the meantime, in Slovakia, as Otčenášová points out, one authorized textbook had to fit the needs of all elementary schools. Similar tendencies prevailed in Hungary after 2010, however, and as school history books tend to be less sophisticated than academic positions, interpretations anchored in the concept of totalitarianism made their return, as well.

The volume ends with two theoretical studies in the "Concluding Essays" section that intend to provide a comprehensive understanding of state socialism. György Wiener revisits the writings of Marx and Engels to argue for using the term 'state socialism' to describe the countries of the Soviet bloc. He emphasized that, in contrast to Marx's vision, it was not in the most developed countries that the revolution triumphed. He concludes that the fact that reforms and democratization efforts of state socialism led to the restoration of bourgeois society confirms rather than refutes the validity of Marxist analysis. Finally, analyzing both the historical stages of state socialism and Marxist thinkers' views about it, Péter Szigeti offers an alternative model of dialectical democracy for the formation of public interest by adding, in addition to party organs, the so-called 'agora' for democratic decision making.

With its thematical heterogeneity and propensity to draw conclusions from or generalize through the example of the Hungarian case, the volume offers a wide understanding of state socialist development. Most of its studies reveal the authors' strong commitment to theoretical thinking, but their analysis is more bound to economic processes than ideology. Despite the Hungarian focus of some studies, the volume contributes to a more subtle analysis of state socialist regimes and consistently raises the question of historical alternatives.

Literature

Békés, Csaba: *Enyhülés és emancipáció. Magyarország, a szovjet blokk és a nemzetközi politika, 1944–1991* [Détente and Emancipation. Hungary, the Soviet Bloc, and International Politics, 1944–1991]. Budapest: Osiris–MTA TK, 2019.

Fritzpatrik, Sheila. *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195050004.001.0001

Kotkin, Stephen. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1995. https://doi.org/10.1080/03612759.1995.9949203

Niederhauser, Emil. *Kelet-Európa története* [The History of Eastern Europe]. Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézet, 2001.

Szűcs, Jenő. *Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról* [An Outline of Three Historical Regions of Europe]. Budapest: Magvető, 1983.

© 2023 The Author(s).

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).