

# NATIONALISM AND RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN POLITICS

by Leslie A. Muray

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Even the most anti-nationalist liberal in contemporary Hungary would not find my response to the invitation to write this paper by saying, "Isten áld meg a Magyarot!" ("God Bless the Hungarian", the title and refrain of the Hungarian National Anthem) particularly unusual or objectionable, but merely stating a historical fact, illustrating vividly the pervasive depths of nationalist feeling. I also need to point out that such a deep feeling of national pride is hardly the original sin of Hungarians, substitute the name of any country and people in the region and one will find each one proudly asserting that they have historically represented the entire region, their struggles and sufferings endured for the sake of civilization itself.

Before outlining what I attempt to accomplish in this paper, a few remarks that will, hopefully, prove illuminating are in order. Hungarian life and culture, politics and religion, the Hungarian "soul" itself, is full of paradoxes and contradictions, countervailing tendencies and forces. For example, there is an old Hungarian saying to the effect that whenever you get two Hungarians together, you will find at least three political parties! Anyone who has grown up in an Hungarian family like I did knows the element of truth in that statement. And precisely because Hungarian politics is so fractious and contentious (even in the supposedly monolithic Stalinist period, there was an epic power struggle between the "natives" and the "Muscovites" that shaped in profound ways the events preceding, including and following the uprising of 1956), there is a tendency to emphasize national unity, "pulling together," in order to overcome fragmentation; often by the same people who celebrate the diversity of worldviews and political ideas.

In similar fashion, given Hungary's numerous struggles for independence, against oppression, and for the extension of the sphere of freedom to larger segments of the population, there is a nearly anarchic, romantic love of freedom in the Hungarian soul. A marvelous illustration of this is the famous incident during the Revolution of 1956 when a much inconvenienced crowd cheered the fact that a trolley car was arriving late! At the same time, given the fact that so much of life for so long has been insecure and unpredictable, there exists a profound desire for security and order; often on the part of the same people who relish the anarchic love of freedom. Needless to say, the most persistent issues of Hungarian life are how to reconcile political pluralism and diversity with national unity, anarchic, romantic love of freedom with security and order. As we

shall see, these are not only socio-political-economic-cultural issues, but profoundly religious as well.

Now to turn to the contents of this paper. The first section examines the orientation of the political parties that participated in the roundtable negotiations and that have been major players on the political scene since then toward issues pertinent to religion, nationalism, and the resurgence of nationalist populism. The second section analyzes the most pivotal series of events in the transition from communism to postcommunism, the split in the ranks of the Opposition Roundtable on the issue of the popular referendum concerning the presidency and the outcome of the referendum itself. This series of events has haunted the major party of the ruling coalition, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, since then, leading to the questioning of the government's very legitimacy. I also analyze the impact of the referendum on the elections of 1990.

The third section examines political developments since 1990 that are relevant to the complex relationship between religion, nationalism, and populism, highlighting the much publicized drift to the right, most evident in the resurgence of anti-Semitism and of nationalist passion concerning territories containing large populations of ethnic Hungarians ceded to neighboring countries in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, the stop to that drift, and the ensuing isolation of the extreme right. I also make the claim that the roots of contemporary Hungarian political trends can be most appropriately traced to the quite heterogeneous group of populist writers that came to prominence in the 1930's. Of diverse religious backgrounds and orientations, with some of them quite anti-clerical and hostile to religious institutions, all of the populist writers fused elements of the Christian myths with their populist ethos. The contemporary importance of these writers needs to be seen in the context of a country, in fact, for the most part, the diverse cultures of an entire region, where historically religion and culture are inseparable, as is quite evident today in spite of the efforts to suppress religion during the Communist Period. I conclude this section with a discussion of the subsequent drift to the left culminating in the election of the Socialists in 1994. The fourth section deals with some of the basic dynamics of contemporary religious life and its complex relationship to politics.

The final section concludes with a summary and some tentative evaluative remarks.

## I.

One of the major events of modern Hungarian history occurred on September 18, 1989 when the agreement resulting from the Round Table negotiations was signed and announced. Free, multi-party elections had been agreed upon; a presidential election, with the President of the Republic chosen by popular vote, was scheduled for November. Parliamentary elections would be held later.

Among the nascent political parties participating in the negotiations that would play important roles during the election campaign were the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), the Independent Smallholders' party, the Social Democratic Party, the Hungarian People's Party, and the Christian Democratic

People's Party. The Alliance (Federation) of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) was not recognized as part of the Roundtable Opposition by the Communist party (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party or MSZMP) although it did participate in the Roundtable Opposition's own strategizing sessions and became a signatory to the negotiations.

Before I turn to the events surrounding the referendum on the presidency, a look at the histories, backgrounds, and orientations of the major political parties may prove to be helpful. The Hungarian Democratic Forum was the first of the major parties to be established, founded in November, 1987, at Lakitelek, a meeting that is now part of the "mythos" of the transition, particularly since it was a follow up to a meeting on the part of the various factions of what was then the opposition at Monor in the previous year under the leadership of Ferenc Donáth, the key figure in the dissident movement in the '70s and '80s, who had been one of the leaders of the "native" Communists during World War II, played a leading role in the cabinet of Imre Nagy during the Revolution of 1956, and served a three year prison term in the same case that saw Nagy, Pál Maleter, and Miklós Gimes executed.

Founded primarily by populist writers, among them Sándor Csoori and István Csurka, the MDF emphasized national issues and historic traditions, pursued a policy of moderation, and recognized its potential strength in the villages and towns, the traditional strongholds of Hungarian populism (during the elections, MDF would be the only party to have a grass roots organization in every village, town, and city in Hungary). It also had a very good relationship with the populist wing of the MSZMP, particularly with Imre Pozsgay, who was the first among leading Communists to call the Revolution of 1956 a "popular uprising" and who played a vital role in winning approval for the ceremonial reburial of Imre Nagy and his martyred friends and in the entire negotiating process.

The Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) is the only political party on the current scene that also existed prior to the Communist takeover. In fact, it was founded in 1930 as a party of independent farmers, later expanding its constituency to include the middle class. In the elections of 1945, it had been the overwhelming winner, taking 57% of the vote. As the elections were approaching in 1990, the party split into two (now three) reflecting its rural and middle class constituencies. The orientations of both wings stressed some populist themes, i.e. emphasis on historic traditions, with a Christian-national hue, and a liberal economic program.

The third significant populist group, although small in membership, was the Hungarian People's Party, which saw itself as the successor to the National Peasants' Party, a radical, democratic, populist party established during World War II primarily by populist writers and that played, in spite of its small size and percentage of the vote, a significant role in post-war coalition politics. After the first round of the elections in March, 1990, it would become insignificant.

The Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) includes tendencies that look to Western European models of Christian Democracy, particularly the German, as well as romantic views of national community as its central idea. Although committed to

parliamentary democracy and a multiparty system, they do tend to see individual rights as secondary to the prerogatives of traditionally collective units of society. Socially conservative and nationalist, they are concerned with the high number of abortions, with what they see as the collapse of Hungarian moral character, and emphasize historical continuity (i.e. the historic state concept of the Crown of St. Stephen). For them, Transylvania, a part of Romania since the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, is of vital importance, not "just" a matter of the human rights of ethnic Hungarians. I should add that the conservatives of the KDNP have much in common with the right wing of the MDF and FKGP. Its more extreme elements are quite anti-Semitic and anti-Gypsy.

The two liberal parties were (and are) the Alliance of Free Democrats and Alliance of Young Democrats. The former, an outgrowth of the dissident Network of Free Initiatives, was comprised of urban intellectuals, most of them former Marxists, who had been consistently at the forefront of the activities of the democratic opposition in the 1980's. Like the MDF and FKGP, they included a broad range of wings and tendencies, ranging from social democratic to consistently liberal in politics and economics. What all the various factions did (and do) have in common is an uncompromising emphasis on human rights and civil liberties, part of the heritage of being dissidents for so long, and in various ways combining liberal economics with a social democratic emphasis on social justice. It also needs to be pointed that part of the meaning of the word "liberal" is free thinker, especially in the Hungarian context, namely, that there is nothing, not even symbols of nationalism, that is beyond question.

The Alliance of Young Democrats, (FIDESZ), which grew out of the youth movement that broke away from the official Communist youth movement (MISZOT) in March, 1988 is liberal politically and economically, established early and strong support for the rights of marginalized minority groups (gypsies, gays and lesbians), and yet were also to establish populist roots; they saw their liberalism in continuity with Hungary's historic progressive movements. In many ways, they transcended the historic "populist-urbanist" split that has dominated Hungarian politics since the 1840s. They were brash, abrasive, young, and bold in their opposition to the Communists. Many Hungarians felt these characteristics were a breath of fresh air. FIDESZ did have an age limitation of 35 on its party membership, which was not lifted until the spring, 1993, and which certainly did not preclude people from voting its candidates. It is unclear whether this age limitation had any impact on the size of the vote it received.

The Social Democratic Party was revived. It received considerable financial and moral backing from the Social Democratic parties of Western Europe which expected Hungary to be a natural place for a Social Democratic victory. However, the Social Democrats were severely handicapped by factional infighting largely between an old guard of communists in their seventies and eighties against whom the younger members did not have a chance of winning. The most important reason, however, was the memory of the forced fusion of the Social Democratic and Communist parties in 1948. Those Social Democrats who did become Communists were severely compromised; the names of some of them were synonymous with the reprisals that followed the suppression of the uprising of 1956. Moreover, although the party attracted a following among the urban

working class during the interwar period, basically because it was the only completely labor oriented party, its traditional dogmatic Kautskyite style Marxism seemed to be an alien, foreign import to the sizable number of industrial workers who were transplants from the rural areas. And it was this "traditionalist" former communist element that triumphed over the Western welfare state orientation of the younger members as the elections approached.

The Hungarian Socialist Workers Party broke up on October 7, 1989. The hard liners, most of them elderly, kept the old name and since that time has been a rather insignificant, often comical grouping on the political scene. The reform wing formed the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), a Western style pragmatic socialist party. Through Imre Pozsgay, as we have seen, the party's populist element had strong connections to the populist writers in the MDF. Another of its populist leaders, Mátyás Szűrös, who as President of the Parliament read the proclamation of the Republic of Hungary on October 23, 1989, and who served as interim President from that time until the newly elected Parliament selected a President on May 3, 1990, held a televised press briefing during Barbara Bush's visit to a refugee camp for ethnic Hungarians who had fled from Transylvania. Szűrös emphasized that he had raised at some length the issue of the rights of ethnic Hungarians in the neighboring nations, a traditional concern of populists in all parties, in the course of official discussions with President Bush. There were widespread but unsubstantiated rumors of the Hungarian army being on maneuvers on the Romanian border even as the American President was visiting Hungary.

What were the attitudes of these political parties to issues pertaining to religion and nationalism? With the exception of what was left of the MSZMP, which as already mentioned was inconsequential, all of the major parties thought that the treatment of the churches and synagogues, their leadership and membership, during the communist period had been a travesty. While none of them favored a return to the semi-feudal system of land ownership that existed until 1945 and under which the Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches owned nearly one-third of the arable land in Hungary, all of them, to varying degrees, favored the return of confiscated lands and properties, to the degree that they could be returned. The only differences, which some Hungarians thought were significant, concerned how much to return or, more accurately, how much was realistic to return. The liberals of the SZDSZ and FIDESZ, as well as the Socialists, thought that confiscated church properties serving a useful social function, i.e. schools, universities, and hospitals, should not be returned. The populist parties, especially their Christian-nationalist factions, favored the return (at least in their rhetoric) of some of these properties as well. All of the parties were united in their concern that, given the country's growing economic difficulties, land was indispensable for the support and increasing need for the self-sufficiency of local churches. They were, given the traditional inseparability of Hungarian culture and religion, also united in seeing the nurture of Hungary's religious institutions as absolutely crucial to the task of socio-politico-economic-cultural transformation that was at hand.

There were (and are) significant differences between the parties as well. The liberals in SZDSZ and FIDESZ and the Socialists advocated (and advocate) the separation of church

and state. Some of the Socialists, former reform Communists, were concerned that religious instruction would be mandated in public schools and that their right to be atheists would not be tolerated. Most of the liberals, mostly secular intellectuals, many of them former Marxists, certainly familiar with the more unsavory aspects of Hungarian religious history, show a very subtle, nuanced appreciation of not only the connection between religion and culture in Hungarian life and history but the complexities of theological formulations as well (to the point that I often wish my secularist colleagues in the USA would show such sophistication). The populists, the Christian-nationalists especially, it goes without saying, favored a much more explicitly "Christian course": nurturing the national heritage traditionally linked to being "a Christian nation" through the provision of religious instruction in public schools. Needless to say, this is a very controversial issue. To people from the United States, government financed and supported religious instruction in the public schools will sound strange, smacking of the "establishment" of religion, which may perhaps seem undemocratic. However, we need to remember that most of Europe, including Western Europe, has a long history of established state churches.

In the context of Hungarian politics, the Christian nationalists did want the establishment of religion, but given the pluralism of religious traditions, they did not advocate the official state establishment of any particular branch of Christianity. Although they favored religious instruction in public schools, they envisioned strictly voluntary attendance, with religious instruction provided by leaders of the various religious traditions, including Judaism and Islam, for their own members as well as interested non-members. In other words, the religious instruction provided in public schools was not meant to be used as a means of proselytizing. It remained questionable whether the expectation of such neutrality was realistic and whether the rights of non-believers and religious minorities could be respected and protected under such a system.

As far as nationalism is concerned, the major parties had no substantial disagreements on matters of foreign policy. In 1989-1990, with Soviet troops still stationed on Hungarian soil (the final withdrawal would be completed on June 30, 1991, a date whose anniversary is a national holiday), all of them agreed that Hungary needed to regain its full national sovereignty and in that regard promised to negotiate the full withdrawal of Soviet troops; that Hungary needed closer ties to the West economically and politically although given the country's geographical location and the complexities of the geopolitical situation, most political figures at that time maintained that the most realistic foreign policy orientation was neutrality. As the elections approached and its various stages unfolded, most political figures, with the exception of the more extreme, more isolationist nationalist populists of various parties, became increasingly open and vocal about Hungary's need to join the European Economic Community. Some, mostly in the MDF, even advocated that the country join NATO--once Soviet troops had been withdrawn.

Although all of the political parties expressed concern about the plight of ethnic Hungarians in the neighboring states, they were significantly different in what they emphasized and the rhetoric they employed. The liberals, with FIDESZ, as usual,

showing greater sensitivity toward the particularities of Hungarian ethnicity, used the language of universal rights, which had been so effective during the Communist period, and advocated sensitivity toward the ethnic and national sensibilities of the neighboring states. The populists, on the other hand, stressed that it was the rights of ethnic Hungarians that was at stake, the right to preserve the particularities of an ethnic identity, language, culture, and history.

## II.

Now to return to the story of the unfolding events surrounding the referendum on the presidency and the elections themselves. During the negotiations, the Roundtable Opposition had agreed that while its members were free to carry on discussions with the ruling party, the only way they could be successful was by presenting a united front. Consequently, they agreed that all of the Roundtable's members would have to consent to a negotiated agreement.

Political life became increasingly complicated as a result of the Roundtable Opposition's own success. Its members had been united in rejecting the political legitimacy of the rule of the Communist power; their own political legitimacy seemed to be compromised now as negotiations had been conducted in secret; yet another "solution" imposed "from above" appeared on the horizon. Due to public pressure and a desire for legitimacy, a traditional concern of Hungarian politics, the climactic moments of the final rounds of negotiations and the previously mentioned agreement took place under the glare of television cameras.

It was at this point that the previous unity of the Roundtable Opposition broke up and a pivotal turn in Hungarian political life occurred. The Social Democrats signed the agreement but rejected the part pertinent to the election of the President. The Alliance of Free Democrats and the Alliance of Young Democrats refused to sign the agreement altogether on account of their rejection, voiced during the negotiations, of the provisions dealing with early elections to the presidency.

Before proceeding with the details of the rest of the narrative, I need to mention that an important aspect of the strategy of MSZMP and later the Hungarian Socialist Party was the tremendous popularity of Imre Pozsgay; if early Presidential elections were held, with other potential candidates virtually unknown, a landslide victory for Pozsgay could be assured and thus some hold on power also guaranteed. With the exception of the Social Democrats, SZDSZ, FIDESZ, the other political parties, the MDF in particular, agreed. There were other considerations that entered their calculations: with the imminent transition to postcommunism, given the likelihood of massive dislocation resulting from economic shock treatment, the desirability of foreign investments, it was important both in terms of domestic politics as well as foreign policy to have a popular, well known quantity as President.

SZDSZ and FIDESZ, however, wanted to have a public referendum on the presidency. In order to do so, they needed to collect 100,000 signatures on a petition calling for the referendum. They had no trouble in doing so.

Hungarian law provides that at least 50% of eligible voters participate in a referendum for it to be considered valid. Optimistically thinking that since its voters would stay away the turnout of voters would not approach the necessary 50%, resulting in the nullification of the referendum, MDF and MSZP advocated a boycott of the vote on the presidency. The strategy proved to be a big mistake.

Accusing the MDF of collusion with the former communists and increasing the intensity of their anti-communistic rhetoric, SZDSZ and FIDESZ wound up the big winners of the referendum; around 60% of eligible voters turned out and approved the referendum by a very narrow margin.

As the elections approached, the MDF was in disarray following the referendum. Jozsef Antall became the new leader of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and quickly sought to distance himself from the populist writers and Pozsgay. Since the anti-communist rhetoric of SZDSZ and FIDESZ was a winner politically, he and others in the new leadership of the MDF also escalated the heat and intensity of the anti-communism rhetoric. He reminded voters of the fact that many in the SZDSZ came from old party cadre families and of the Marxist and radical past of the leadership of the SZDSZ; János Kis had been a student and disciple of Görgy Lukács in the early seventies, Miklós Haraszti had been a Maoist, and the most consistent liberal in the party, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, had been an anarcho-syndicalist at one time.

The anti-communism of MDF, with its new leadership, had an authentic ring. Antall and others in his circle came from aristocratic backgrounds; his father had served in the cabinet of Admiral Horthy, the regent of Hungary from 1920 to 1944; they all claimed to have suffered during the communist period on account of their background, with Antall having been arrested but not sentenced in the aftermath of the uprising of 1956. Antall's political orientation was that of a Western style center-right Christian Democrat whose political role model was Konrad Adenauer.

It was the liberals of SZDSZ who were now thrown off stride. Hardly in a position to turn either to the right or the left, the Free Democrats were in search of a constituency. They sounded increasingly abstract in their political rhetoric and came across as the urbanist Budapest intellectuals that they are. It also appeared increasingly unlikely that voters would entrust the government at such a critical time to the leaders of FIDESZ whose "elder statespersons", Viktor Orbán and Gábor Fodor, were at the time 27 and 26 years old respectively.

The elections were held in two rounds, in March and in April. According to the election law, only those parties that received at least 4% of the vote in the first round were eligible to move on to the second. After more than four decades of one party rule, 58 parties participated (wherever two Hungarians gather together...). The result of the second round

of the voting were as follows: on the center-right, 42.7% for the Hungarian Democratic Forum, 11.4% for the Independent Smallholders' Party, and 5.4% for the Christian Democratic People's Party; on the liberal side, The Alliance of Free Democrats was the recipient of 23.6% of the vote while the Alliance of Young Democrats received 8% of the vote; and finally, 8.5% voted for the Socialists. With nearly 60% of the vote and seats in Parliament, MDF formed a center-right coalition with the Independent Smallholders' and Christian Democratic People's Party.

Although Antall and his circle were essentially middle class intellectuals with a Western Christian Democratic orientation, it was the populism of the center right parties that had carried the day. As Misha Glenny has written, "... the slumbering bear of Hungarian populism awoke from its hibernation ..."

### III.

In this section, I shall examine political developments since 1990, focusing on the drift to the right and the stopping of that drift, especially in relation to issues pertaining to religion, nationalism, and populism, and the subsequent drift to the left culminating in the election of the Socialists in 1994. Before doing so, however, I need to turn briefly to the "populist-urbanist" rift alluded to earlier. Although this rift has Hungarian characterized Hungarian politics since the 1840s, it has been particularly acute since the beginning stages of the transition to postcommunism. It is virtually impossible to understand contemporary Hungarian politics (to the degree it can be understood!) without some grasp of this fundamental difference in orientation.

Put briefly, the populists are nationalists with a rural orientation who want to preserve the distinctiveness of Hungarian culture and identity while the urbanists are Western oriented liberal intellectuals. As Misha Glenny has written:

"... in Hungary there are two distinct and apparently irreconcilable traditions, the populist and the urbanist. Both claim to work towards the same end but by very different means. Described crudely, the populists believe that in order to survive Hungarian culture must remain pure, while the urbanists consider it essential to integrate Hungarian culture with European patterns. An important sociological difference is the large number of intellectuals and Jews who are involved with the urbanists. As a result Hungarian populism has often, but not always, been infected by anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism".

As a consequence of the threat from the right and the apparent dominance of the populist nationalists, Hungarian liberals and Western observers became concerned about the country's potential plunge into the "politics of backwardness". There are, however, as we shall see later, major political figures who do combine elements of the populist and the urbanist traditions, a synthesis far more typical of the major historical figures of the populist movement.

Now to return once again to our narrative, the newly formed coalition government and its parliamentary majority quickly reached an agreement with the opposition, mostly SZDSZ and FIDESZ, on parliamentary procedures. On May 3, 1990, one day after the new Parliament convened, its members elected Árpád Göncz, a writer who had been imprisoned for six years in the aftermath of the uprising of 1956 and a member of SZDSZ, President of the Republic as part of a deal whereby the opposition supported an amendment to the constitution limiting the number of issues requiring the approval of a two-thirds majority in parliament, thus avoiding legislative "gridlock". Göncz has proven to be the most important stabilizing force on the Hungarian political scene, and the country's most popular politician; although by the fall of 1993, his approval rating had slipped to 72%.

Almost from the time it took office, MDF and its coalition partners began a persistently precipitous decline in popularity. In the municipal elections of October, 1990, SZDSZ and FIDESZ split the vote, gaining an absolute majority in most municipalities. More importantly, when the government, without consulting Parliament, the trade unions, or the Chamber of Commerce, announced that gasoline prices would be doubled the next day, the cabdrivers of Budapest staged a strike and blockade that brought the entire city to a halt. All intersections throughout the country were blocked, paralyzing transportation for two days. The government backed down and a negotiated settlement reached; gasoline prices were liberalized and the tax on a gallon of gasoline was set a fixed amount. Public opinion surveys indicated that 60% of the population supported the cabdrivers unconditionally, with another 25% of expressing sympathy.

Since the cabdrivers strike and blockade, the ruling coalition has been keenly aware and concerned with its own legitimacy, often questioned by the opposition. As we have seen, the nagging issue of legitimacy was the fundamental issue behind the referendum on the presidency, its roots traceable to the secretive nature of the Round Table negotiations. Hungary's rightward drift and the Antall government's protracted passivity toward it can be understood in terms of its quest for legitimacy, an attempt to distance from the communist past.

The rightward drift I have been talking about will be more intelligible through a chronology of political events pertinent to this paper. In 1991, following televised debates, Parliament voted to return church properties confiscated during the communist period. In spite of the rhetorical heat, the real issues being how much could be realistically returned, especially considering that some of these properties had been turned into schools, universities, and hospitals, there was little of substance that divided the ruling coalition and the opposition on this issue. What was of significance was that previously confiscated schools, predominantly Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran were returned. Perhaps of greater significance was Parliament's vote in the same year to reintroduce religious instruction in the public schools. We have already seen in a previous section the position of the various parties on this issue, MDF and its coalition partners backing the measure, seeing it, ideally, not as a means of proselytizing but as a way of inculcating traditional values, in continuity with historic traditions, the liberals of SZDSZ

and FIDESZ opposing it on civil libertarian grounds and espousal of the separation of church and state.

I have to mention that the state financed and sponsored textbooks dealing with religion, written largely by intellectuals with liberal sensitivities, are scrupulous in their scholarship, eminently fair, impartial, nuanced, and subtle in pointing out the insoluble link, with all its ambiguities, between religion and culture in Hungary's national heritage.

There have been several other issues that pertain, directly and indirectly, to religion and religious life. One of these was the issue of calling into account those who were responsible for the suppression of and the reprisals following the uprising of 1956. Parliament did pass legislation enabling such legal action to be taken, suspending the expiration of the statute of limitations. However, President Árpád Göncz, referred the legislation to the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court declared the law unconstitutional on the grounds that no one could be tried for what was legal under a previous regime.

The decision of the Constitutional Court raises a number of complex philosophical and religious issues as well as political and pragmatic considerations. If perpetrators of atrocities could not be tried because their alleged crimes had legal sanction at the time they were committed, does this not manifest a relativism, if not nihilism, that sees legality completely in terms of what particular governments determine to be legal at a particular time in history? Moreover, how could authentic national reconciliation take place if the perpetrators of terror were not brought to justice, if there were no historic justice? Was this the victory of the collective amnesia encouraged until the last year and a half of communist rule?

A powerful answer on one side was provided by no less a figure than Elie Wiesel during a visit to the country of his birth. Consistent with his views on the Holocaust and its perpetrators, he maintained that human rights are universal, that atrocities are atrocities regardless of their legality at the time of their commission, that "crimes against humanity" are "crimes against humanity" regardless of their legality or government sanction during the period of the time they took place.

Part of the consideration of Árpád Göncz and László Solyom, President of the Constitutional Court and a member of MDF, on the other side of the issue, were pragmatic. They were acutely aware of how changes in regimes during Hungary's twentieth century history were accompanied by vengeance and reprisal; if Hungary was going to enter the 21st century as an authentic democracy, if it was going to rebuild its society, it needed to let go of this seemingly endless pattern of recrimination. As early as March 15, 1989, the traditional Hungarian national holiday (which was allowed to be celebrated legally once again beginning in 1988), when there was an increasing public outcry in some quarters to "hang all the communists!" Göncz and Solyom encouraged the spirit of reconciliation and national reconstruction with the slogan "Lift your brains, not your fists!" I also hasten to add that Solyom's logic was also very strongly influenced by the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights of December 10, 1948, which states

that "no one shall be held guilty of any penal offense on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offense, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed".

Another burning issue was abortion. The historical and socio-politico-cultural context for the abortion debate is entirely different from that of the United States. In contrast to the Stalinist laws of the 50's which banned abortion and imposed tax penalties on childless couples as well as single people, under the Kádár government, in spite of some legal nuances, abortion was available on demand. With a lack of birth control information, abortion became the chief method of birth control. The combined effect of a decline in life expectancy, particularly for middle age males, whose rate of death has been rapidly increasing, the highest rate of suicide in the world, and one of the world's highest rates of abortions has led to a decline in population from 10.7 to 10.3 million during the 1980s. This fueled an old concern of the populist nationalists (dating back to the '30s when Slovak and Rumanian population growth was more than double that of Hungarian nationals in their homeland) about the survival of "Magyarság"--a term that can mean "Hungarian people" as well as "Hungarianess" or "Hungarianhood", a term with no less mystical connotations than "Ruski narod" for Russians.

Thus, the focus of the abortion debate revolved partly around the opposition by religious groups, as might be expected, but much more vociferously around the issue of the survival of "Magyarság." It is important to point out that few of the anti-abortion advocates wanted a total ban. In fact, there were MDF affiliated Roman Catholic attorneys of Christian democratic, Christian nationalist persuasion who saw *Roe v. Wade* as the best model for Hungarian "pro-life" legislation!

The Constitutional Court decreed that Parliament would have to pass abortion legislation by January 1, 1992. The compromise that emerged will seem strange to Americans. Although there is a twenty-four hour waiting period during which women contemplating abortion have to stay at a house where they will receive "counseling," it is illegal for "counselors" to influence or manipulate women's decisions in any way (let alone show pictures of aborted fetuses!) Although the dust seems to have settled, it remains to be seen how long this compromise lasts.

A related issue was the government's campaign "to return women to the home." Instead of being an echo of the Religious Right in the United States or the reflection of the triumph of Central and Eastern European traditionalism, the campaign replicated similar moves that were carried at times of economic hardship during the Kádár regime. The rationale was that by reducing the size of the work force with the return of women to the home, the level of unemployment would also be reduced.

To be sure, there were very strong elements of traditionalism, patriarchy, and anti-communism (seeing the emancipation of women as part of communist ideology) in the government's campaign, which was strongly opposed by the liberals. The support of some women for the campaign also reflected their feelings about their experiences under communism, experiences of the dichotomy between their supposed emancipation and the

reality of oppression. While Hungarian feminists were obviously critical of the ruling coalition's efforts, they, along with feminists from the other countries of the former Eastern bloc, never tire of reminding Western feminists of the differences in their experiences and conditions from those of women in the West, explaining, not justifying, why many Central and Eastern European women feel the return to the home to be emancipatory. Although the number of self-consciously and intentionally feminist groups is small, and in spite of existing inequalities between women and men, in spite of the anti-feminism and patriarchy of the rhetoric of the government, its efforts were in my view illusory. Economic conditions in most instances practically necessitate women working outside the home, while culturally the emancipation of women (i.e. on the whole, women are better educated than men) has come too far to make retrenchment possible, let alone desirable.

Another issue that aroused political passions and that is an aspect of the rightward drift was the so called "media war." As the Hungarian Parliament was about to engage in an interminable debate about a new "media law" regulating Hungary's state owned TV and radio (there is one independent TV station that had been in existence even before the transition, CNN International, HBO, MTV, Eurosport, DUNA TV for ethnic Hungarians across the borders, BBC, and two German speaking stations, mostly on cable; there are numerous private radio stations, including an underground gay and lesbian oriented station in Budapest). Much of the political heat focused on the head of Hungarian TV, Elemér Hankiss, who had been a dissident and who played an instrumental role in the historic reappraisal of the uprising of 1956 that led to the ceremonial reburial of Imre Nagy, a well respected sociologist and frequent visiting professor in the United States whose Eastern European Alternatives has been one of the most accurate prognostications of postcommunist developments and has turned into a near classic. To a lesser extent, the political controversy also focused on the head of the state radio, Csaba Gombár. The exact nature of the substantive issues involved is difficult to pinpoint. Hankiss did serve as very convenient and visible target to those who wanted to engage in a "witch hunt" of former communists and discard former dissidents with communist pasts. Moreover, as a civil libertarian liberal he eventually wanted to free the Hungarian electronic media entirely from state control and set it on a path that would follow Western models. For this, he was accused of "cosmopolitanism" and neglecting the Hungarian national heritage. The liberals defended him and advocated no state control or jurisdiction over any of the media. As for Antall himself, he exhibited unusually thin skin when criticized in the media, much more so than the last communist government. Hankiss and Gombár were finally suspended (President Göncz refused to abide by Parliament's wishes to fire them) and arrested on unspecified non-criminal charges of misconduct; their interrogation was rude and nasty. If we are tempted to say with Yogi Berra that we have already seen this *deja vu*, it may be important to keep in mind that Hankiss does not attribute the slightest bit of malice or undemocratic, authoritarian, dictatorial inclinations to Antall; he attributes the actions taken against him completely to Prime Minister's hypersensitivity to criticism.

In talking of Hungary's rightward drift and the stopping of it, I have in mind (as does the Western press) the issues that have been the center of political debate in postcommunist

Hungary; the rise of anti-Semitism and nationalism. Much of the debate centered and still surrounds the figure of István Csurka, a writer and playwright, who was one of the founders of the MDF. From the very beginning, his political rhetoric was full of passionate anti-Semitism. Indeed, before he turned to politics, he was notorious for increasingly vociferous anti-Semitic outbursts the more he imbibed, then knocking on the doors of women he wanted to seduce, loudly calling them "Jewish whores" for not wanting him. In the 1990 election campaign, the SZDSZ, many of the members and leadership of which, including János Kis and the author, former President of PEN, György Konrad, are of Jewish origin, bore the brunt of Csurka's anti-Semitism. Although Göncz and the leadership of the other parties did condemn anti-Semitism, neither Antall nor the other leaders of MDF criticized Csurka directly nor did the Prime Minister distance himself from the populist writer.

Csurka's anti-Semitic rhetoric became increasingly vitriolic. He also attacked Antall politically and personally, at times on the floor of Parliament in the presence of the Prime Minister. As vice-president of MDF, the populist writer was assured of high visibility, an instant forum as well as aura of credibility, not diminished by the Prime Minister's silence.

As economic conditions declined, unemployment reaching over 600,000 and the inflation rate at 38% by mid-1992, Hungary started to witness the growing phenomenon of skinheads, beatings of gypsies, the muggings and beatings of foreign tourists. Police reaction was inadequate, and there was one reported incident of the police beating several ethnic Chinese while they were in custody. To have someone of Csurka's stature express jingoistic, anti-foreign, anti-Semitic sentiment and to have the leadership of his party and the government tolerate it lent an aura of legitimacy to the seemingly increasing rightward drift.

It was certainly not the case that Antall and his immediate circle in the leadership shared Csurka's views. However, it was quite telling that as a political realist the leader of the MDF and the head of the government seemed too weak in his own party to disavow Csurka; he seemed unsure about the number of "secret Csurkists" in his own parliamentary majority who possibly might threaten the survival of the governing coalition if cut adrift.

There were less kind assessments as well. Philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás, one of the leaders of SZDSZ, observed "Antall is personally not anti-Semite, but he's cynical enough to tolerate it if he thinks it is useful."

In contrast, President Árpád Göncz became the honorary president of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Society, formed in response to twenty two beatings of dark skinned students and gypsies recorded by the Budapest police during the first six months of 1992. The President also apologized to the students "in the name of the Hungarian people." SZDSZ, FIDESZ, and the Socialists were unrelenting in pointing to Csurka's resurrection of a dark side of Hungarian history and Antall's seemingly Machiavellian or patient tolerance of it.

Things started to come to a head after Csurka published a manifesto on August 20, 1992 in the Hungarian Democratic Forum weekly blaming "the New York-Budapest-Tel Aviv axis", an international conspiracy among bankers, communists, and the parliamentary opposition--i.e. Jews--for Hungary's ills. He also made thinly veiled intimations about the racial inferiority of the gypsies. The choice of August 20 as the date of publication for the manifesto was not coincidental: it is one of Hungary's greatest national holidays, the day of St. István (St. Stephen), who Christianized the Magyars, unified the people, established the Hungarian state, and its historic borders; in 1992, August 20 was the final day of the meeting of the World Federation of Hungarians, the largest of its kind since before World War II. The meeting was also attended, as observers, by academics of Hungarian origin from various disciplines (historians, scientists, philosophers) whose conferences had been held just prior to the meeting of the World Federation, deliberately timed to entice them to spend extra time (and money) in their country of origin.

This time, Antall did seek to distance himself, the MDF, and the government from his nemesis. However, he did not confront Csurka directly, and tepidly maintained that each family (like the MDF) had its rebellious adolescent who actually did some good by shaking things up.

The extreme right seemed encouraged, if not legitimized. In early September, about 10,000 of them demonstrated in Budapest. As a response, 100,000 people participated in a demonstration, co-sponsored by virtually every conceivable political party and association, for "a democracy without fear."

The anniversary of the Revolution of 1956, October 23, now a national holiday, saw the occurrence of a very ugly incident. As President Árpád Göncz was about to address the large crowd gathered in Kossuth Square in front of the Parliament, he was prevented from doing so by loud whistles and hisses. Among those leading the jeers aimed at Hungary's most popular politician were neo-Nazi skinheads, who, it has been alleged by observers, were aided by plain clothed border guards brought to the demonstration by the Interior Ministry in army trucks. Because of the bright lights illuminating the square, it is impossible to see any shiny heads on the video of the incident. However, persistent, loud chants of "Long Live Antall!" are very distinct. The broadcaster for the state owned TV station mentioned this fact, described it as contrary to the solemnity of the occasion and the ideals of the Revolution. Needless to say, this fueled the media controversy raging at the time, with demonstrators gathering quickly at the TV station. Uncharacteristically, Göncz did not attend the festivities at the Opera House at which Antall was speaking the night of October 23.

There was growing concern on the part of the liberals as well as the Western media about Hungary's rightward drift. The concern grew in December, 1992 and January, 1993 as Csurka made an aborted grab for power in the MDF. Antall had the MDF abolish the position of party vice-president and had it replaced by a committee of twenty members. Five of those twenty seats were given to the offended Csurkists, leading to concern that even if he was defeated for the leadership post, Csurka's power was actually growing in the MDF; in retrospect, it looked like a move designed to pacify the Csurkists.

However, although some of the liberals and some in the Western media felt Antall yielded to pressure, especially to threatened as well as actual withdrawal of Western investment, the IMF's refusal to renegotiate Hungary's debt supposedly because of its budget deficit, he may very well have been biding his time until he felt strong enough to move against the populist writer. In late spring, 1993, Csurka and some of his followers were expelled from the MDF. As a sop to the conservatives, the MDF also expelled two of the leading members of its liberal wing, including Jozsef Debreczeni, who had compared the anti-democratic, anti-communist, and anti-Semitic elements of Csurka's piece of August 20, 1992, to Nazi ideology. Parliament also passed legislation criminalizing the public display of the swastika and the hammer and sickle. To civil libertarians in Hungary as well as the West, such restrictions may seem to compromise the kind of freedom of expression that is a prerequisite for democratic development. An old question was raised: when you start restricting freedom of expression where do you stop? What is there to guarantee that such restrictions will stop? In the context of the history of Hungary over the last fifty years, the restriction of the use of symbols that arouse violent passions inimical to the stability of a democratic government, it seemed a relatively small price to pay for a less volatile atmosphere in which democratic institutions and sensibilities could be nurtured.

As for the ongoing soap opera that constitutes the political career of István Csurka, shortly after his expulsion from the MDF, the Socialist daily Népszabadság, the most Western style, informative, and objective among Hungary's postcommunist newspapers, gleefully disclosed that Csurka had worked as an informer for the III/III, the successor to the notorious AVO, the state security police. The populist writer did not only not deny the accusation, his response was flip, bordering on the contemptuous. As mentioned before, the Socialists did not attempt to disguise their glee, an attitude the liberals found ironic. The liberals, on the other hand, took a Havel like approach; they maintained that everyone was guilty of complicity in the maintenance of the communist system and focused their criticism not on Csurka's past or his person but the dark, potentially ominous forces he came to represent.

The populist writer's followers, sizable in the populous Hungarian emigre community throughout the world, felt betrayed. Inside and outside Hungary, Csurka seemed discredited. Nevertheless, he was undeterred, founding his own political party, *Magyar Igazság* ("Hungarian Truth or Justice"; *Igazság* can mean both truth and justice) *és élet* (life). He also started his own foundation and newspaper, Magyar Ut (The Hungarian Way)--the name of a famous populist journal of the '40s.

The spectre of anti-Semitism had once again raised its ugly head. Hungary does have a long history of anti-Semitism, with deep roots in Christian anti-Judaism, culminating in the liquidation of 90% of the Jewish population of Hungary during the Holocaust. To be sure, the mass deportation of Jews did not begin until the German occupation in March, 1944. Unfortunately, much of the gendarmerie, other governmental authorities, and some segments of the population, particularly in the rural areas, participated enthusiastically in the deportations. The Jewish Hungarians who were saved were, for the most part, either inhabitants of Budapest or refugees who had managed to escape to the city. The reign of

terror perpetrated by the fascist Iron Cross saw an almost desperate attempt to eliminate what was left of the Jewish population until nearly the last possible moment before the final victory of the Red Army.

This all too brief and inadequate allusion to the long and ambiguous history of anti-Semitism in Hungary hardly begins to do justice to a topic of enormous complexity and consequence. Suffice to say three things of significance. First, as with most countries in the former Soviet bloc, the Holocaust had not been dealt with adequately. Second, anti-Semitic populist nationalists, who, like their predecessors, see Jews as "alien" and "foreign", therefore undesirable and a threat to Magyarság, conveniently forget that some of the greatest heroes of Hungarian history saw the country's Jewish population as fully Magyar, their contributions to Magyarság of immeasurable value: during the Revolution 1848-1849, Sándor Petöfi, Hungary's national poet, and Louis Kossuth, the regent at the time, fought for the emancipation of the Jews, a measure enacted by the Diet in 1849. Ferenc Deák, a "*Haza Bölcsö*" ("the country's or homeland's wise one") insisted on emancipation being a part of the compromise of 1867 that created the Austro-Hungarian empire. Anti-semitic populist nationalists also conveniently forget that Jewish Hungarians have participated in the country's struggles for independence, whether in 1848 or 1956, in disproportionate numbers. They were also the victims of the ensuing reprisals in disproportionate numbers. The amnesia of today's nationalist populists also includes an aversion to anti-Semitism on the part of some of the very people in the populist movement of 1930s and 1940s to whom they trace their direct ancestry (although, admittedly, some were anti-Semites; most of them, as a result of the persecution of Jews during World War II, abandoned all anti-Semitic references).

It is painful to read people like János Kis and István Eörsi, a liberal writer who had been imprisoned for three years in the aftermath of 1956, assert that they would not remember that they were Jews if the anti-Semites had not reminded them. Miklós Haraszti, one of the leaders of SZDSZ and the last person tried in Hungary for political crimes, recalls that, never having been told of his Jewish origins by his parents, he found out about them from the anti-Semitic remarks of his classmates in public school. There are few countries in the world the Jewish populations of which are as assimilated as Hungary's, a country and a heritage they genuinely love in spite of the fact that it has not always appreciated or wanted them.

It is significant that, with all the controversy surrounding the resurgence of anti-Semitism, a poll has shown that 75% of the population believe Jews to be part of the Magyar nation, comparing favorably with the region's other countries where notions about Jews being a tribe alien to the national majority are widespread. Another poll showed that only twelve percent of Hungarians had unfavorable opinions about Jews, indicating a lower-rate of popular anti-Semitism than in most other countries even though Hungary has twice as many Jews as the other five countries of the former Soviet bloc combined. The results of studies of a similar study in Poland, to use one example, indicated that, although there are only approximately 5,000 Jews in the country, fully one third of respondents thought its Jewish populations had "too much power", with 47% expressing the sentiment that Jews should not have the right to be elected to parliament.

Negative attitudes towards Jews stood at 34% in Poland, 20% in the former Czechoslovakia, and 14% in France. In the United States, similar studies showed that in the 1960's about one-third of the population held negative stereotypes of Jews with another third showing mild evidences of anti-Semitism. When the study was repeated in 1981, results showed a significant decrease in anti-Semitic stereotyping, with the percentage of those thinking that Jews have "irritating faults" dropping 40% to 19%, the proportion responding affirmatively to the notion that Jews are "stick together too much" declining from 52% to 40%, and the segment of those believing that Jews indulge in "shady business practices" falling from 42% to 23%.

In any event, instead of helping politically, there has been a backlash against the resurgence of anti-Semitism: certainly compounded by continuing economic hardship, the approval rating for the MDF led coalition government dropped to 15% by mid-1992, below 10% by the summer of 1993 (what they would not give for Bill Clinton's "low" approval ratings!)

I shall turn at this point to a discussion of the issue of the resurgence of nationalism.

The controversy began on June 2, 1990, when Jozsef Antall, recently having taken the office of Prime Minister, declared that in addition to being the Prime Minister of ten million Hungarians living in Hungary, in a legal sense, he considered himself the Prime Minister of all fifteen million ethnic Hungarians living all over the world in a spiritual sense. While explicitly rejecting the use of violence to redraw borders, alluding to Hungary's being a signatory to the Helsinki accords, Antall did say that "historically," he felt compelled to condemn the Treaty of Trianon. When the Prime Minister's statement raised considerable controversy, he reiterated his conviction that the Hungarian government had "a moral and spiritual duty to be responsible for every member of the fifteen million member Hungarian community."

The condition and rights of ethnic Magyars, particularly in Transylvania, Slovakia, Vojvodina, and the Carpatho-Ukraine has been a concern for many Hungarians since the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which ceded to neighboring states two thirds of Hungary's territories inhabited by one-third of its ethnic Magyars, some of its richest resources, and most "sacred" historical places. The Treaty of Trianon provides the historical context for twentieth century Hungarian nationalism. During interwar period, ethnic Hungarians were often denied the right to their ethnic integrity, especially in Transylvania. In no small measure, this was a reaction against the Hungarian government's policy of enforced "Magyarization" in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. Hungary's neighbors have sensitive memories of the interwar period's Horthy regime's unequivocally irredentist policies and eventual alliance with the Axis Powers in order to regain lost territories where the majority of the population was made up of ethnic Hungarians.

The immediate aftermath of World War II saw the expulsion of ethnic minorities in a number of countries in the former Eastern bloc; Hungary expelled many "svabs" (Germans) and Slovaks; Czechoslovakia expelled ethnic Germans and Hungarians. Although under communist rule, the lid was supposedly kept on nationalism and ethnic

conflict, communist governments suppressed national minorities and ethnic groups, used nationalist rhetoric, and pursued nationalist policies.

The most immediate historical context that aroused the concern about ethnic Magyars was Nicolae Ceausescu's policy of "systematization" or modernization of the countryside, which threatened the very existence of historic villages in Transylvania. Although in actual fact only Romanian villages were destroyed, the steady stream of ethnic Hungarian refugees across the borders into Hungary in the late 1980s led to the accusation that Ceausescu's policies were a form of cultural genocide. As early as June, 1988, between thirty and fifty thousand people participated in demonstrations against the village reconstruction plan; the largest demonstration in Hungary since 1956.

The pivotal role of László Tökés, an ethnic Hungarian, now a Bishop of the Reformed Church, and honorary chair of the Hungarian Democratic Union, the largest opposition party in Romania, in the events that served as a catalyst for the Revolution of 1989 are well known. Incidents of ethnic violence occurred in the spring of 1990; ethnic tensions have continued, with Tökés holding an eleven day a hunger strike in September.