
The Politics of Legitimacy and Hungary's Postwar Transition

MARK PITTAWAY

The years between Hungary's occupation by the Red Army that concluded its traumatic involvement in the Second World War and the construction of socialist dictatorship in the country at the end of the 1940s constitute a moment of transition, a moment that is central to understanding the subsequent development of the country. For this reason the interpretation of this moment of transition has been mired in controversy. For much of the Cold War, Western historiography characterised this moment as one defined by the ruthless drive of the Hungarian Communist Party and the country's Soviet occupiers to eliminate political opponents and thus pave the way for dictatorship.¹ Others argued that the moment of postwar transition should be separated from the dictatorship that followed it and should instead be seen as a distinct sub-period, in Charles Gati's words a 'democratic interlude' before the onset of Stalinism.² The subsequent collapse of Hungary's socialist dictatorship has not led to any kind of scholarly consensus about the meaning of the postwar transition. The polarised nature of the country's post-socialist politics have resulted in historians attempting to appropriate aspects of the immediate postwar years to contribute to essentially political debates about Hungary's present. Some have seen the postwar transition as being 'an attempt to introduce a state based on the rule of law and its failure', thus arguing that the transitions in the middle and at the end of the twentieth century were directly comparable.³ For historians associated with the conservative right, however, postwar anti-fascist purges formed no more than a cynical attempt by the country's Soviet occupiers and their domestic clients to lay the foundations of a 'totalitarian' regime.⁴

¹ Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*, rev. and enlarged edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 3–64. Bennett Kovrig, *Communism in Hungary: From Kun to Kádár* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), 153–230. George Schöpflin, 'Hungary', in Martin McCauley, ed., *Communist Power in Europe, 1944–1949* (London: Macmillan, in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1977), 95–110.

² Charles Gati, *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), 13–123.

³ Mária Palasik, *A jogállamiság megteremtésének kísérlete és kudarca Magyarországon, 1944–1949* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2000).

⁴ Sándor Szakács and Tibor Zinner, *A háború 'megváltozott természete' – Adatok és adalékok, tények és összefüggések – 1944–1948* (Budapest: Batthyány Társaság, 1997).

Almost all the scholarly work on Hungary's moment of transition has focused either on the actions of the superpowers or on the dynamics of high politics within the country. Studies that use the perspectives of social history to understand the moment of transition are virtually non-existent, and there is a dearth of work on the social history of the postwar period more generally.⁵ There have been no studies that focus on the social dimensions of politics during the postwar transition, despite the fact that such a perspective has much to reveal about the nature of the transitional moment. This article is a preliminary attempt to fill some of that gap in a way that will both stimulate further research and reveal the potential that studying the social dimension of politics in the mid- and late 1940s has for improving our understanding of Hungary's moment of transition. It focuses on what I term the politics of legitimacy that accompanied the postwar transition, as various political actors struggled to legitimate their respective visions of the country's future.

For political scientists legitimacy is measured principally in terms of how far a given political regime is legitimated according to a set of social norms and expectations that are essentially ahistorical. For example, David Beetham argues that legitimate power can be discerned if the exercise of power conforms to rules that are established either legally or socially, that those rules can be justified in terms of the belief systems of both dominant and subordinate groups and if subordinate groups consent to the exercise of power.⁶ Measured by these criteria, Hungary, shaken by war, occupation and an enforced change of regime, cannot be said to have had a truly 'legitimate' regime at any point during the twentieth century, at least prior to the democratic transition of the 1990s. This does not mean, however, that the concept of legitimacy is an inappropriate one. Through analysing the attempts of the various political actors to legitimate their rule in the light of the belief systems of subordinate groups and the patterns of consent and opposition to that rule, it is possible to sketch the contours of a politics of legitimacy in Hungary following the end of the Second World War. That politics of legitimacy was intimately linked to the process of postwar state formation in the country and is thus fundamental to understanding both the nature of the political system that existed during the country's transitional moment and the social constraints under which political actors operated.

A focus on the politics of legitimacy as a dynamic and incomplete process points to the need to integrate the history of Hungary's postwar transition into a much longer history of political conflict over the nature of the country's political and social system. Shaken by the defeat of Austria-Hungary in the First World War, the dismemberment of the old kingdom of Hungary as a result of the postwar Treaty of Trianon, the brief history of the Soviet Republic in 1919, and violent counter-revolution, there was little

⁵ For some exceptions to this rule see Sándor Horváth, László Pethő and Eszter Zsófia Tóth, eds., *Munkástörténet – Munkásantropológia* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2003); Mark Pittaway, 'The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture and the State in Early Socialist Hungary', *Journal of Modern History*, 74, 4 (2002), 737–69; Tibor Valuch, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a XX. század második felében* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001); and Zsuzsanna Varga, *Politika, paraszti érdekérvényesítés és szövetkezetek Magyarországon 1956–1967* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2001).

⁶ David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 16.

consensus in interwar Hungary over what a legitimate form of political rule might look like. The country was governed by a deeply conservative regime headed by the regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, characterised by an oligarchic parliamentarism that rested on an uneasy alliance between the aristocratic elite and the radical right. Held together by irredentism, anti-socialism and an increasingly aggressive antisemitism, it was able to rule with considerable support from the 'Christian' middle classes and propertied groups more generally. Communist parties were banned, while the moderate Social Democrats (Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt – MSZDP) gained only token parliamentary representation in view of the restricted franchise, as did the Independent Smallholders' Party (Független Kisgazdapárt – FKGP), formed by those parliamentary deputies who remained outside the governing elite because of their advocacy of radical land reform that challenged aristocratic hegemony. Consequently, the working class, agricultural labourers and smallholders were largely excluded from the political system, which they experienced as profoundly repressive – a feeling intensified by the economic crises which the country experienced during the early 1930s.⁷

The deep-seated social conflict over legitimacy, to which the interwar regime was a response, intensified as a result of Hungary's traumatic involvement in the Second World War. Trapped by its desire to regain territories Hungary 'lost' at Trianon, domestic radical right-wing mobilisation and official antisemitism, the country was drawn into war on the side of Germany. This resulted in military catastrophe on the Don in early 1943, domestic discontent that strengthened those demanding radical social reform and an abortive attempt to switch sides to the Allies, motivated by fear of Soviet invasion that in turn led to German occupation in March 1944. The following nine months saw the deportation and murder of the majority of the country's Jewish population, the removal of Horthy and his replacement by a puppet regime headed by the National Socialist Arrow Cross, and finally the invasion and occupation of Hungary by the Red Army.⁸ Established state institutions collapsed as their officials fled in the face of the Red Army's advance, forcing the country's new occupiers to construct a new state almost from scratch.

Legitimacy was crucial to the project of shaping a new state from the beginning, due to popular distrust of the country's occupiers. Many Hungarians feared the arrival

⁷ The following accounts shed light on the interwar Hungarian regime: Ignác Romsics, *Magyarország Története a XX. Században* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999); Andrew C. Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary 1825–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); Gábor Gyáni, 'Magyarország társadalomtörténete a Horthy-korban', in Gábor Gyáni and György Kövér, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a reformkortól a második világháborúig* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1998), 167–356; and Steven Béla Várdy, 'The Impact of Trianon upon the Hungarian Mind: Irredentism and Hungary's Path to War', in Nándor Dreisziger, ed., *Hungary in the Age of Total War (1938–1948)* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1998), 27–48.

⁸ On the war years see Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, condensed edn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); Cecil D. Eby, *Hungary at War: Civilians and Soldiers in World War II* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998). György Lengyel, ed., *Hungarian Economy and Society during World War II*, trans. Judit Pokoly (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1993).

of the Red Army before it crossed the country's eastern border, given the anti-communism of much of the population and perceptions of Russian 'barbarity' that were reinforced by state propaganda. The behaviour of Red Army troops towards Hungarian civilians, characterised by rape and looting, when combined with the policies of the Soviet occupation authorities who deported large numbers of male civilians and insisted on the immediate payment of reparations, transformed distrust into outright hostility. The new 'Popular Front' provisional government established in the eastern city of Debrecen in December 1944 under the auspices of the country's occupiers and the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt – MKP) was forced to domesticate the new regime by constructing a new state that was at least visibly, if not operationally, separate from the occupation authorities and thus able to acquire a degree of legitimacy within the society it sought to govern.

State formation and the search for legitimacy in postwar Hungary were intimately linked. While the new state was able to acquire despotic power to an extent through the support of the Soviet occupation authorities, it was forced to achieve a degree of 'infrastructural' power – that is the power to enforce its will on an everyday level – through mobilising certain social groups to populate its local institutions and thus assert its authority.⁹ State formation, therefore, entailed the search on the part of Hungary's new rulers for a viable social base on which their new state could be built, and involved them in confronting the issue of legitimacy. While the Popular Front government was a coalition of all anti-fascist parties, it was numerically dominated by the left, particularly the MKP. In constructing and populating the institutions of the postwar state, the left was forced to appeal directly to those social groups effectively excluded from the interwar political system, those who were determined to see no return either to the policies of the Horthy era or the war years. This proved too restricted a social base to enable the state to secure its authority, thus laying the social foundations of future political conflict. The industrial working class provided the most secure base of the new state, allowing the country's new rulers to consolidate their authority in factories and urban centres. Attempts to appeal to smallholders and the urban middle class, however, backfired. While the state directly involved the rural poor through radical land reform, only in parts of the country did this bring the country's new rulers a real political dividend. It instead created a political culture in most rural areas based on small-scale land ownership that proved deeply resistant to the egalitarianism promoted by the new state. Furthermore, the broad middle-class groups, who had supported the interwar regime, were deeply disoriented by their loss of status and alienated from the new state.

The weaknesses in the left's attempt to create legitimate state authority were exploited by the FKgP, which had emerged as the most conservative of the anti-fascist parties in the Popular Front coalition. They were able to rally a coalition of

⁹ I have borrowed the notions of the 'despotic' and 'infrastructural' power of the state from Michael Mann, 'The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results', in Michael Mann, *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 5–9.

agricultural smallholders and the middle class, in order to shape a political project that offered Hungary a thoroughly democratised conservatism which rose from the ruins of the authoritarian conservatism of the interwar years. This project implied that under its auspices the nature and direction of postwar state formation could rest on alternative notions of legitimacy to those used by the left. It also transformed the FKgP from the small party, based largely on the propertied peasantry, that had existed during the interwar years into a catch-all party representing centre-right opinion, allowing it to win an overall majority of both votes and seats in the November 1945 parliamentary elections. The breadth of support for this alternative political project dashed left-wing hopes of legitimating their vision of the postwar state through democratic means. The conflict between these two attempts to shape a legitimate political regime formed the backdrop to the bitter political struggles that rested on social polarisation between those who feared a return to the policies of the interwar years on the one hand and those who feared socialist dictatorship on the other. The conflict, moreover, had a central impact on the formation of political identities that shaped the attitudes of ordinary Hungarians towards the emergent political parties. Most importantly, it formed the backdrop to the country's slide into dictatorship that characterised the late 1940s as the international pressures on Hungary's Soviet occupiers changed.

The politics of legitimacy and the formation of the postwar state, 1944–5

The arrival of the Red Army on Hungarian soil during late 1944 prompted the collapse of state authority in the eastern half of the country as Soviet troops swept towards Budapest. The majority of the aristocracy, public officials and professionals fled, shocked at the catastrophe that had overtaken them as the country became a theatre of conflict and frightened of likely Soviet retribution, in view of Hungary's participation in the war on the side of Nazi Germany. At the crossing of the River Tisza at the town of Szolnok 'the whole of the lordly population of the lands east of the Tisza queued . . . and went towards Budapest'.¹⁰ Behind Red Army lines the country's new rulers estimated that between 70 and 80 per cent of all state employees had fled in the face of the Soviet advance.¹¹ The weak provisional government established in Debrecen by the Soviets, based as it was on political groupings with no connection to their potential supporters, was unable to fill the power vacuum that emerged.¹² As Hungary's territory was progressively 'liberated' during early 1945 and the provisional government moved to Budapest, the task of constructing a new state with a viable social base became ever more urgent. The obstacles to this goal,

¹⁰ István Márkus, 'Urak Futása' reprinted in his *Az Ismeretlen Főszereplő: Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1991), 87.

¹¹ Mihály Korom, *A Népi Bizottságok és a Közigazgatás Magyarországon 1944–1945* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1984), 17.

¹² Mihály Korom, *Magyarország Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormányja és a Fegyverszünet, 1944–1945* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981); and Miklós M. Szabó, *A Magyarországi Felszabadító Hadműveletek, 1944–1945* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1985).

however, remained formidable, given the marked unpopularity of the Red Army and the economic chaos that convulsed the country.

Prior to the siege of Budapest, as Soviet troops moved across eastern Hungary their behaviour towards the population generated considerable resentment.¹³ The Red Army's occupation of Budapest and major industrial centres in early 1945 revealed the brutality of its occupation policies in three principal ways, all of which would have relevance for the legitimacy of the postwar order. The first of these was the widespread use of rape against the female population. Because of social stigma and political taboo no serious attempt was ever made to measure its extent at the time. It was a widespread experience, nevertheless, as attempts to estimate its extent from examinations of the birthrate, recourse to abortion and the recorded incidence of sexually transmitted disease have shown.¹⁴

The second major act of the Soviet occupying forces was the deportation of large numbers of male civilians to the Soviet Union. A Red Army order issued in December 1944 forced the Interior Ministry of the new Hungarian government to prepare a list of those with German names in order that they perform forced labour for the war effort. In reality, it allowed for the indiscriminate rounding up and detention of able-bodied men across the country.¹⁵ The total numbers rounded up in this way were substantial, though precise numbers are again difficult to estimate. In Újpest, on the northern fringe of the Greater Budapest conurbation, the factory committee of the Chinoin pharmaceuticals factory reported to the Ministry of Popular Welfare in February 1945 that 'the Red Army has taken away large numbers of our skilled workers partly because of their German names'.¹⁶ Deported civilians formed a substantial proportion of the 570,000 Hungarian prisoners of war who were held by the Soviet Union during the second half of the 1940s.¹⁷

The third major problem was the reparations policy of the Soviets. The ceasefire agreement between Hungary and the Allies allowed the Soviet authorities to seek reparations in the form of finished products or fixed industrial plant.¹⁸ In the

¹³ Sándor Márai, *Memoir of Hungary, 1944–1948*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Albert Tezla (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1996), 24–113; Chris Hann, *Tázlár: A Village in Hungary* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 159; and Martha Lampland, *The Object of Labor: Commodification in Socialist Hungary* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1995), 113.

¹⁴ Andrea Pető, 'Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna in 1945', in Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Life After Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Washington, DC, and Cambridge: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129–48.

¹⁵ György Zielbauer, 'Magyar polgári lakosok deportálása és hadifogsága (1945–1948)', *Történelmi Szemle*, 34 (3–4) (1992), 270–91.

¹⁶ 'A Chinoin Gyógyszer és Vegyészeti Termékek Gyára Rt. üzemi bizottsági elnökének jelentése a népjóléleti miniszterhez: a vállalat az országnak fontos egészségügyi bázisa, üzembe helyezése sürgős. A gyártás megindításának problémái', in Károly Jenei, ed., *A Munkásság az Üzemekért 1944–1945: Dokumentumgyűjtemény* (Budapest: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1970), 251.

¹⁷ Iván Pető and Sándor Szakács, *A hazai gazdaság négy évtizedének története I: Az újjáépítés és a teremtés irányítás időszak 1945–1968* (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1985), 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

immediate aftermath of 'liberation', industrial plants operated under the Soviet military authorities producing directly for the war effort, and they returned to civilian production in late spring 1945.¹⁹ Some industries continued to produce directly for reparations purposes; in others the Soviet military authorities sought to dismantle factories and transport their machinery to the east.²⁰ Where this was done, it had catastrophic consequences for the workers affected. This in turn resulted in significant levels of opposition to left-wing activists, particularly communists, on the shop floor when production was restarted.²¹

The unpopularity of the Soviets compromised many of the new state institutions, especially when they were seen to work in concert with the Red Army. This was particularly true during early 1945 of the police force, which was created from the ranks of left-wing activists. They were primarily occupied in identifying sources of potential political opposition to the new regime and deliberately avoided recruiting those who had served in prewar elite units, such as the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie, into the ranks.²² They were seen as largely inseparable from the Soviet occupation regime, and were associated with the arbitrary actions of the Red Army. This problem was neatly illustrated by the way in which local populations, particularly in the working-class suburbs of Greater Budapest, confused the imprisonment of Hungarian civilians by Soviet troops with attempts by the new police force and local authorities to organise reconstruction efforts. Újpest resident Miklós Péterffy recalled that 'during that time there was the 'little robot', they took people away to rebuild bridges, or took them as prisoners-of-war'.²³ This confusion was not surprising. As the Red Army rounded up able-bodied men, the police organised those without gainful employment into brigades to rebuild their communities.²⁴ This resulted in fear of the police and a culture of mistrust between state organs and the population.²⁵

The collapse of old state institutions, distrust of new ones and a deep-seated fear of the occupying authorities contributed to an atmosphere of generalised disorder, exacerbated by the parlous economic situation, that in part manifested itself in a substantial crime wave during 1945. In the factories the supply of food and fuel that factory committees could guarantee was often insufficient to meet the needs of the workers for survival, forcing workers to pilfer from their factories in order

¹⁹ Iván T. Berend, *Újjáépítés és a nagytöke elleni harc Magyarországon 1945–1948* (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1962), 28–30.

²⁰ Ferenc Gáspár, 'A Magyar Nagyipari Munkásság Harca az Üzemek Megmentéséért Helyreállításáért és a Termelés Megindításáért 1944–1945', in Jenei, *A Munkásság az Üzemekért a Termelésért*, 58.

²¹ I discuss one such example in Mark Pittaway, 'Workers in Hungary', in Eleanor Breuning, Jill Lewis and Gareth Pritchard, eds., *Power and the people: A Social History of Central European Politics, 1945–1956* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, forthcoming, 2005).

²² Szakács and Zinner, *A háború megváltozott természete*, 75–144; and András Zoltán Kovács, 'Csendőrsors Magyarországon 1945-után', in Imre Okváth, ed., *Katonai perek a kommunista diktatúra időszakában 1945–1958* (Budapest: Történeti Hivatal, 2001), 103–140.

²³ 1956-os Intézet Oral History Archivium (1956 Institute Oral History archive, hereafter OHA), 181 – Péterffy Miklós, 57.

²⁴ 'Rendet a közmunkák téren!', *Szabad Újpest*, 24 Feb. 1945, 2.

²⁵ 'Megint a közmunka', *Szabad Újpest*, 17 March 1945, 2.

to participate in the barter economy.²⁶ Outside the factory gates during 1945 ‘the deterioration of economic circumstances and unstoppable inflation created a huge crime wave among the population of the capital’.²⁷

War brought economic ruin in its wake. The military conflict in the country during autumn 1944 severely disrupted agricultural work.²⁸ Estimates of war damage to national property were enormous; in the summer of 1945 the industrial employers association GYOSZ calculated that war losses to industrial buildings amounted to some 16.22 per cent of their 1938 value, the damage to raw materials some 11.21 per cent and that to completed products some 23.79 per cent.²⁹ This devastation was particularly intense in Budapest. In the Ganz Vaggon factory, one of the capital’s largest industrial enterprises, most of the plant buildings were damaged and some 70 to 80 per cent of the machinery had been destroyed. When the factory committee restarted production in late January 1945 it employed 786 workers, as opposed to an estimated 8,000 who had worked there in October 1944.³⁰ Given the collapse of transport and production, attempts to restart industrial production were plagued by severe shortages; the capital’s shipyards were hampered by a lack of coal, wood and spare parts.³¹ Absolute shortages of food increased the desperation of the situation. In spring 1945 the Ganz Vaggon’s factory committee admitted that it was only able to guarantee food with a calorific level of 35 per cent of what was needed by a manual worker.³²

In this situation, barter replaced the markets that had collapsed during the conflict. In Tatabánya skilled metalworkers ‘were sent out to work in the villages for free to repair the tractors, the threshing machines and the mills’ in exchange for food.³³ This was distributed by the factory committees with the evident intention of retaining their workforces in an economic climate in which the value of money wages had been reduced to almost nothing.³⁴ Distrust of state institutions and the occupation authorities led new local authorities and producers to guard their

²⁶ Politikatörténeti és Szakszervezeti Levéltár (Archive of Political History and Trade Unions, hereafter PtSzL), A Volt Szakszervezeti Központi Levéltár anyaga (Papers from the former Central Archive of Trade Unions, hereafter SZKL), Vasas Szakszervezet iratai (Papers of the Metalworkers’ Union, hereafter Vasas)/37d./1945, ‘Jelentés gyári lopásokról’.

²⁷ ‘Részlet Budapest rendőrfőkapitányának a közigazgatási bizottság számára a rendőrség 1945. második félévében kifejtett tevékenységéről készített jelentéséből, 1946 január 26’ in Ferenc Gáspár, ed., *Források Budapest Történetéhez IV: 1945–1950* (Budapest: Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 1973), 215.

²⁸ Magda M. Somlyai, ‘Az 1945-ös Földreform’, in Magda M. Somlyai, ed., *Földreform 1945, Tanulmány és Dokumentumgyűjtemény* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1965), 29–30.

²⁹ ‘Magyarország Ipara 1945 nyáran’, in Sándor Tonelli, ed., *Ipari Újjáépítésünk* (Budapest: Forum Hungaricum Kiadás, 1948), 17.

³⁰ PtSzL SZKL Vasas/37d./1945, ‘A Ganz és Társa Üzemi Bizottságának 1945. évi záró jelentése’, 3; *Idid.*, ‘Tájékoztató, Budapest 1945.február 23’, 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ‘Memorandum a Ganz hajógyári dolgozók helyzetéről és kívánásairól’, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, ‘Jelentés a Ganz-kocsigyár 1945.évi egészségi helyzetéről’, 2.

³³ PtSzL, Politikatörténeti Intézet Levéltára (Archive of the Institute for the History of Politics, hereafter PIL), 867f.K-306, 7.

³⁴ For an example see Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian National Archive, hereafter MOL), Magyar Pamutipar Üzemi Bizottság iratai (Papers of the Factory Committee of the Magyar Pamutipar, hereafter Z1204)/1cs./1t., 35–6.

autonomy jealously and subvert state attempts to reconstruct the shattered economy. In agricultural communities, such as the town of Martonvásár during the harvest of 1945, smallholders kept what they needed for subsistence while the local 'national committee' – the new postwar local authority gave priority to feeding its own landless poor from the surplus, subverting state attempts to feed the industrial centres.³⁵

The left was therefore forced both to put distance between new state institutions and the Soviet occupation authorities and to emphasise the importance of reconstruction in order to legitimate its rule. In order to do this, leading actors within the Popular Front government, particularly the MKP, deployed an ideology of 'democratic, national reconstruction'. The state was labelled 'a new democracy'. This concept, worked out by the exiled Communist leadership in Moscow, relied as much on notions of democratised property ownership as it did on any notion of political freedom or representative government. According to Mátyás Rákosi, the secretary of the MKP, it meant a state that realised the aspirations of the poor peasantry and the working class. As far as the rural population was concerned, he argued that 'the acid test of the new democracy is the land question. He who does not want to see land given to the peasants, who wants to retain the system of great estates, is an enemy of Hungarian democracy.' For industrial communities 'the basic demand of Hungarian democracy is the immediate abolition of any obstacle to the full economic and political realisation of the power of the working class'.³⁶ Communists differentiated between what they saw as 'socialism' and 'democracy'. For them 'democracy' was a stage when capitalist relations continued to exist, but also when the state, acting as the agent of the working class, peasantry and progressive intelligentsia, exerted considerable pressure for greater social equality and social ownership.³⁷

This was tied in left-wing rhetoric to plebeian Magyar nationalism. For Rákosi the task of the new state was 'the construction . . . of a new democratic homeland'.³⁸ This combination of a left-wing notion of 'democracy' and plebeian nationalism was tied to an ideology of reconstruction which, in view of the situation of the country, had obvious appeal and served to emphasise the state's attempts to overcome postwar economic devastation. The use of Magyar nationalism allowed leading political actors on the left to articulate an identity for the new state distinct from the Soviet occupation authorities. The egalitarianism that underpinned MKP rhetoric permitted the left to build the state from below by linking it to the social revolution in the country's factories and fields that accompanied the end of the Second World War. Yet in identifying itself with radical social upheaval, the postwar state was only

³⁵ István Márkus, 'A Demokrácia Két Éve Martonvásáron (Szociográfiai vázlat)', *Forum* (1946), 259.

³⁶ Mátyás Rákosi, 'Mi a Magyar Demokrácia?', in Mátyás Rákosi, *Válogatott Beszédek és Cikkek* (Budapest: Szikra Kiadó, 1950), 47.

³⁷ In the Hungarian context this distinction is clearest in the work of Imre Nagy, Communist Minister of Agriculture (1945), Minister of the Interior (1945–6), Prime Minister (1953–5; 1956) on the difference between the democratic and socialist transformations of agriculture: see Imre Nagy, *Agrárpolitikai Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Szikra Kiadó, 1950), 253–5. The distinction was also implicitly made by Rákosi; see his 'Föld, Kenyér, Szabadság', repr. in Rákosi, *Válogatott Beszédek és Cikkek*, 56–70.

³⁸ Quoted in *A Népi Demokrácia Útja: A Magyar Kommunista Párt III. Kongresszusának Jegyzőkönyve* (Budapest: Szikra Kiadó, 1946), 23.

able to gain a highly limited degree of legitimacy, in that change moved either in directions that restricted the appeal of the left, as in rural areas, or provoked outright opposition, as among the urban middle class. Furthermore, the MKP and its allies were not always able to control the dynamic of social change initiated by postwar revolutionary transformation.

The left's attempts to construct a viable social base for their vision of the postwar state were at their most successful in industrial, working-class communities. In the factories the industrial working class had been subjected by 1943 to the dictates of production for the war effort and by the scorched-earth policies of the Germans and the Arrow Cross as it became obvious that the war was lost. Working-class anger built against many managers and supervisory staff who implemented despotic policies in the workplace during the final months of the war. As managers joined other local elites in the flight from the Red Army, largely left-wing activists set up factory committees. Some were inspired by illegal Communist Party cells and based themselves on the memory of the short-lived Soviet Republic. A minority sought the immediate socialisation of the factory. Most, however, wished to restart production in the aftermath of war.³⁹ These institutions, most of which were highly localised responses to the pressures of war and the economic collapse that followed the end of fighting, were used to populate the new state at the local level, giving the left institutions in the workplace which it could use to build its authority. Prominent Communists sought to integrate local organisations such as factory committees and 'national committees' into a political constituency that would support the 'democratisation' of postwar Hungary. According to one such prominent figure, factory committees were 'the most important basic organisations of the industrial working class and the new democracy'. Their role was to eschew militancy in the interests of reconstruction and thus 'abandon the kind of behaviour that big capital expects of them'.⁴⁰ Labour competitions began in spring 1945, introduced by the left-wing parties and trade unions, to link local reconstruction concerns to national policies and to the organisational drives of the left-wing parties, particularly the MKP.⁴¹

These drives were successful in building a social base for the left's state-building project among the restricted ranks of the urban, industrial working class. The legitimacy that this vision attained among this group during the first half of 1945 could be seen in the extensive participation of workers in the reconstruction effort and the rapidly growing membership of trade unions and workers' parties

³⁹ Károly Jenei, Béla Rácz and Erzsébet Strassenreiter, 'Az Üzemi Bizottságok és a Munkásellenőrzés Megvalósulása Hazánkban', in Károly Jenei, Béla Rácz and Erzsébet Strassenreiter, eds., *Az Üzemi Bizottságok a Munkáshatalomért 1944–1948* (Budapest: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1966), 7–146.

⁴⁰ Aladár Mód, 'Az üzemi bizottságok és az újjáépítés', *Szakszervezeti Közlöny*, 1 June 1945, 4–5.

⁴¹ 'A csepeli pártszervezet május 1-i versenyfelhívása Budapest és környéke pártszervezetéihez', *Szabad Nép*, 25 March 1945; 'Angyalöld felel', *Szabad Nép*, 31 March, 1945. Labour competitions were a series of campaigns that mobilized workers to achieve certain production or reconstruction goals in their place of work.

in the largest factories.⁴² Memories of the repression, marginalisation and poverty suffered during the interwar years were fundamental in shaping political identities in working-class communities. This made many workers receptive to the 'new democracy' being created by the left-dominated Popular Front government. Budapest's MÁVAG factory in late 1945 was, according to the social observer, Erzsébet Severini, populated by 'sickly, thin people'. Yet, despite malnourishment, workers participated eagerly in campaigns to reshape the factory. One worker told her that he worked 'to see what will become of the democracy'. Unemployed for much of the 1930s, he wanted no return to the anti-working-class policies of the interwar years; he wanted a more socially just Hungary.⁴³

Yet white-collar staff could not be counted on to provide a social base for the state in the factories in the way in which industrial workers could. The functions that the state devolved to factory committees were not merely restricted to those that served reconstruction: worker representatives played a central role in implementing many of the 'anti-fascist' measures mandated by the new state. White-collar employees in both public administration and industry were subjected to 'verification' when returning to their jobs; this forced them effectively to prove their loyalty to the new system. In factories the experience of being judged by worker representatives chosen by factory committees alienated social groups such as engineers and factory white-collar staff who were crucial to the reconstruction effort.⁴⁴ Yet it was also a sop to working-class opinion which demanded retribution against managers and supervisors. Many white-collar workers fled with the Germans in the face of the Red Army advance. Their subsequent return provoked considerable discontent, and the reappointment of unpopular supervisors provoked explosive conflict, especially when, as in the mines, it coincided with failure to pay wages.⁴⁵

Yet 'verification' was not only driven from below. It was one plank in a whole series of anti-fascist measures that not only were directed against those who had co-operated with the brief Arrow Cross regime but also came to be directed against many whom left-wingers perceived to be 'reactionaries'. They played a central role in generating a climate of fear and undermined the legitimacy of the regime among most middle-class Hungarians, not only those who filled managerial and supervisory positions in the factories. As the Red Army occupied the country, the Hungarian authorities, led by the political department of the reorganised police, destroyed fascist organisations and rounded up their members and collaborators. It interned 'fascists' in camps distributed around the country. The net of internment was cast, however, much wider than former members of the Arrow Cross. The people's courts – the popular organs of

⁴² István Tömpe, 'Munkában az üzemipártszervezet Csepelen', *Pártmunka*, 1 July 1945, 34–6.

⁴³ Erzsébet Severini, *Munkaverseny és a Magyar Munkás Lelkisége: MÁVAG és a Csepeli WM Művek* (Budapest: Atheaneum, 1946), 65–7.

⁴⁴ György Gyarmati, János Botos, Tibor Zinner and Mihály Korom, *Magyar Hétköznapiak Rákosi Mátyás Két Emigrációja Között, 1945–1956* (Budapest: Minerva, 1988), 114–18.

⁴⁵ 'A Magyar Bányamunkások Szabad Szakszervezetének panasza az Iparügyi Miniszteriumhoz: a bányavállalatok tulajdonosai nem gondoskodnak a munkabérekéről és a munkások élelmezéséről, az üzem beosztásokkal pedig a termelés szabotálják', in Jenői, *A Munkásság az Üzemekért a Termelésért*, 506–7.

justice set up to support the police – were responsible for supervising internment and often worked closely with the ‘verification committees’ in workplaces. It has been estimated that 40,000 people were interned between 1945 and 1949. In the capital alone, 16,949 people were interned up to February 1946.⁴⁶ Camps were not hidden from local populations. Újpest’s had 100 inmates by March 1945, and authorities were keen to demonstrate to the population that it was not a ‘death camp’, but one which would allow ‘fascist criminals’ to participate in the reconstruction of the country.⁴⁷ The spectacle of middle-class detainees from these camps working in the factories was a curiosity widely reported in left-wing newspapers during 1945 and 1946.⁴⁸

Middle-class reaction to anti-fascist measures underlined the difficulties encountered by the representatives of the new state and the left in appealing to the middle classes, who were largely alienated from the state that was being constructed around them. As left-wing political thinker István Bibó pointed out, the left-wing parties appealed to the ‘intelligentsia’. While this group included the ‘progressive’ Budapest intellectuals and groups such as engineers, it excluded enormous sections of the middle class who had felt comfortable with the interwar regime.⁴⁹ They greeted the new regime with a sense of alienation and disorientation. The writer Sándor Márai recounted that ‘there were those who complained because the flat, the villa, the magnificent furnishings, thereafter the bank deposit, the upper-class lifestyle, the whole factitious hierarchy, the neo-baroque snobbery had been obliterated. Others expected the Americans to come and chase the Bolshevik Russians back to the Soviet Union, and then everyone will get everything back again; the house owner the house, the landowner the land, and the nimble-penned, prolix writer the easy success’.⁵⁰

If the restricted industrial working class constituted the social base of the new state, while the middle classes were deeply antagonistic the situation in rural communities was profoundly ambiguous. Social revolution in the Hungarian countryside began when the Red Army crossed the border into the south-east of the country, the so-called Viharsárok, dominated by a tradition of agrarian socialism. The departure of the major landholders emboldened the agricultural proletariat and the poorer smallholders to seize land. Land seizures were legitimised by the local ‘national committees’, the new organs of local government set up by left-wing activists as the Red Army advanced. They supported land seizures but were also worried about food supply in the coming year. This movement spread rapidly across the east of the country despite the worries of the country’s new rulers, and was limited only by the

⁴⁶ Mária Ormos, *Törvénytelen Szocializmus: A Tényfeltáró Bizottság Jelentése* (Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó – Új Magyarország, 1991), 15–42; Szakács and Zinner *A háború ‘megváltozott természete’*, 214–8; László Karsai, ‘The People’s Courts and Revolutionary Justice in Hungary, 1945–46’, in István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 233; Gyarmati, Botos, Zinner and Korom *Magyar Hétköznapok*, 108.

⁴⁷ ‘Internálótábor Újpesten’, *Szabad Újpest*, 17 March 1945, 2.

⁴⁸ Géza Gáspár, ‘Amikor a munka büntetés’, *Jövő*, 24 July 1946, 2.

⁴⁹ István Bibó, ‘A magyar demokrácia válsága’, repr. in István Bibó, *Demokratikus Magyarország: válogatás Bibó István tanulmányaiból* (Budapest: Magvető, 1994), 43.

⁵⁰ Márai *Memoir of Hungary*, 122.

shortage of available land.⁵¹ Land reform was legitimated by the new Popular Front government and spread to the whole country as it was 'liberated'. It was, however, to have social and political consequences that were deeply conservative. Land reform had more than 642,342 beneficiaries, of whom 370,963 had been manorial servants or wage labourers in agriculture; by the time of the 1949 census there were 1,149,890 farms of between 1 and 20 kh,⁵² as opposed to 843,414 in 1935. Land reform also led to an increase in the number of economically viable smallholdings.⁵³ The propertied classes in the villages were thus broadened, creating the basis for the spread of a 'smallholder' identity. This identity provided a common point of reference for the propertied of the villages, uniting them in part against the political left and also against those excluded from land reform.⁵⁴

The reconstruction of rural communities around wider property ownership combined with a decentralised political Catholicism in central and western Hungary. The existence of a Catholic political culture in many Transdanubian villages rested on the centrality of the Church to the local community, its dominant role in civil organisations and the role that religion played in shaping the moral economy of rural areas.⁵⁵ The importance of church influence is underlined by examples such as that of the village of Nagykarácsony in the central Hungarian Fejér county. The economy of the village had been dominated by a Church-owned manor prior to land reform; in 1945 church property was transferred to former manorial servants. Despite the opposition of the church hierarchy to land reform, the former manorial servants proved impervious to the attempts of left-wing activists to mobilise them. Local Church-based institutions and the priest continued to command the loyalty of the new landowners.⁵⁶

As the country moved towards free parliamentary elections in the autumn of 1945 that were supposed to seal the country's transition to Popular Front rule, the MKP leaders overestimated the strength of the social base on which their state-building project rested.⁵⁷ This was partly because the leaders of the party had taken the huge increases in party membership, which reached 300,000 by August 1945, as an indication of its level of support in the country.⁵⁸ In reality, the left could only depend on the support of the industrial working class and rural poor, since the middle class was hostile to it and most of Hungary's rural majority remained at best ambivalent

⁵¹ Ferenc Donáth, *Demokratikus földreform Magyarországon, 1945–1947* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969); Zsuzsanna Varga, 'Az agrárium 1945-től napjainkig', in János Estók, ed., *Agrárvilág Magyarországon, 1848–2002* (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó – Magyar Mezőgazdasági Múzeum, 2003), 261–6.

⁵² A Hungarian land measurement; 1kh = 0.58 hectares.

⁵³ Donáth, *Demokratikus Földreform Magyarországon*, 124–5.

⁵⁴ Márkus, 'A Demokrácia Két Éve Martonvásáron', 256.

⁵⁵ Kata Jávor, 'Az Egyház és a Vallásosság Helye és Szerepe a Paraszti Társadalomban', in Attila Paládi-Kovács, ed., *Magyar Néprajz VIII.: Társadalom* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2000), 791–818.

⁵⁶ András Sándor, *Övék a Föld* (Budapest: Szikra Kiadó, 1948), 9–31; András Sándor, *Híradás a Pusztáról, 1945–1950* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1951), 37–130.

⁵⁷ Mátyás Rákosi, *Visszaemlékezések 1940–1956: I kötet* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 1997), 223.

⁵⁸ 'Gerő Ernő Tájékoztatója a Magyarországi Helyzetről 1945. Augusztus 6', in Lajos Izsák and Miklós Kun, eds., *Moszkvának Jelentjük... Titkos dokumentumok 1944–1948* (Budapest: Századvég Kiadó, 1994), 67.

and at worst similarly antagonistic. The restricted social base of the new state created the opportunity for the FKgP to mobilise an alliance of the rural population and the urban middle class around an alternative vision of the postwar state which rested on strategies of legitimation different from those promoted by the left. This enabled them to win an election victory that temporarily broke left-wing dominance over the Popular Front coalition.

Political identities and the struggle over postwar Hungary, 1945–7

During autumn 1945 the left-wing parties moved to legitimate their state-building project through the holding of municipal elections in Budapest and its neighbouring industrial towns, and then national parliamentary elections. This attempt failed; the FKgP won a clear majority in Budapest and 57.03 per cent of the vote in the November 1945 parliamentary elections.⁵⁹ While these elections gave institutional form to the social and political division generated as a result of the incomplete process of state formation that had proceeded throughout 1945, they also represented a new stage in that process. This was because, first they demonstrated that an alternative vision of the postwar state to that presented by the left-wing parties enjoyed majority public support, one that promoted the political hegemony of a transformed, democratised conservative politics that rested on broad property ownership and parliamentary institutions. Second, this in turn generated a crisis of legitimacy for the left to which the MKP responded by launching a bitter political struggle between the left and the FKgP that paved the way for the country's slide into dictatorship at the end of the decade.

The social foundations of the FKgP's winning electoral coalition were already visible when the party reorganised itself during the first half of 1945. Outside the socialist rural far south-east and the industrial areas, the party was able to win support in eastern Hungarian villages by using its prestige as an advocate of radical land reform in the interwar years to recruit smallholders, while many members of the interwar rural middle classes joined the FKgP in large numbers.⁶⁰ As its organisational drive spread to central and western Hungary, the FKgP was well placed to benefit from the spread of a 'smallholder' identity in the villages. In agrarian towns such as Martonvásár, smallholders of all classes, from the poorest to the wealthiest, were drawn to the FKgP on this basis.⁶¹ In urban areas it was able to broaden its base further by appealing to middle-class groups, who, in view of the collapse and discrediting of the interwar

⁵⁹ In the Budapest local elections the FKgP polled 50.5 per cent of the vote to the 42.72 per cent taken by the Workers' Unity Front (an electoral alliance of the MKP and the MSZDP). No other party or electoral alliance won more than 5 per cent of the total. In the parliamentary elections the FKgP took 57.03 per cent, the MSZDP 17.41 per cent, the MKP 16.95 per cent, the National Peasants Party 6.87 per cent, the Bourgeois Democratic Party 1.62 per cent and the Hungarian Radical Party 0.12 per cent (the statistics are adapted from Sándor Balogh, *Választások Magyarországon 1945: A fővárosi törvényhatósági és nemzetgyűlési választások* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1984), 109 and 147.)

⁶⁰ István Vida, *A Független Kisgazdapárt Politikája 1944–1947* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 40–2.

⁶¹ Márkus, 'A Demokrácia Két Éve Martonvásáron', 256.

regime, had nowhere else to go. This lay behind the speedy organisation of the party in the capital; by September 1945, on the eve of the municipal elections, opinion pollsters estimated that 4 per cent of Budapest's population were active in the FKgP.⁶² Anti-communism provided a key motivating factor for members of the middle class to join the party; social observer István Márkus reported that 'when we asked the people of Martonvásár who became a "smallholder" there – they all replied unanimously "those who didn't want to be Communist". The Smallholders' Party thus became the "anti-party" of the Communists in Martonvásár.'⁶³

The diverse coalition of interests represented within the FKgP made for a divided party, in which intellectuals committed to democratic transformation, those who sought to defend the interests of the propertied peasantry and middle-class conservatives formed distinct factions. Yet it also gave the party a breadth of support that the left lacked, enabling it to promote a new, democratised form of conservative politics that could command widespread popular support. Aided by the political blunder of the Allied Control Commission, which, by refusing to allow other conservative parties to register, ensured that there was only one party around which the right could unite, it mobilised that base of support as elections approached. The FKgP's electoral slogan in 1945 – 'God, Homeland, Family' – neatly encapsulated its appeal to the rural propertied classes and emphasised its conservatism. Its programme asserted that rural smallholders were the backbone of the 'nation', and it advocated a liberal democratic political system and an economy based on private property with welfare measures to support the family.⁶⁴ Its rhetoric emphasised similar themes in ways which appealed to its diverse support base. One of its spokesmen, Albert Bereczky, argued in October 1945 that 'the Smallholders' Party wants a social and a bourgeois Hungary; democracy today and democracy tomorrow, we want to be Hungarians and to remain Hungarians tomorrow. We want private property today and to live in a Hungarian way tomorrow'.⁶⁵

The campaign emphasised themes of national independence which were combined with attacks on MKP control of the police and demands for an alternative future. Consequently the FKgP gained an electoral base that mirrored the social composition of its membership. The FKgP took almost two-thirds of the vote in the rural, conservative west of the country, where 'smallholder' identities and political Catholicism were at their strongest.⁶⁶ Its strong performance in urban areas without

⁶² Vida, *A Független Kisgazdapárt Politikája*, 46.

⁶³ Márkus, 'A Demokrácia Két Éve Martonvásáron,' 256. All translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

⁶⁴ 'A Független Kisgazda-, Földmunkás- és Polgári Párt programjából', repr. in Sándor Balogh and Lajos Izsák, eds., *Pártok és Pártprogramok Magyarországon (1944–1948)* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1979), 175–84.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Balogh, *Választások Magyarországon 1945*, 77.

⁶⁶ László Hubai, 'A Független Kisgazdapárt szavazóbázisának regionális változása, 1931–1947', in Tibor Valuch, ed., *Hatalom és Társadalom a XX Századi Magyar Történelemben* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet – Osiris Kiadó, 1995), 439–41.

significant working-class populations was evidence of the way in which it rallied anti-communist middle-class votes.⁶⁷

While the elections revealed the breadth of support for an alternative vision of Hungary's future to that promoted by the left and the MKP, the left retained a key position in a continued Popular Front coalition government as a result of pressure from the Soviet occupation authorities. By virtue of this continued pressure, their ideological consistency and political skill, the Communists, formed the other pole of politics in the limited postwar democracy. The MKP was able to participate in postwar Hungarian politics on the basis that it was perceived as representing the popular movement that had accompanied the Red Army's advance. Its support closely mirrored that of its project to create a postwar 'new democracy', though its supporters often sought more radical changes than were allowed for by the party's more class-conciliatory Popular Front policies. In early 1945 the party attracted the left-wing activists who created the first organs of factory democracy in the belief that these would play a role in a 'revolution from below' which would accompany the Soviet advance.⁶⁸ As more of the country was 'liberated', the membership of the party grew enormously; by mid-1946 6.7 per cent of the total population were members of the MKP; 42.6 per cent of members were industrial workers, while a further 39.4 per cent were poorer smallholders and agricultural labourers. This membership was concentrated in urban industrial areas, or in regions with an agrarian socialist tradition such as the Viharsárok.⁶⁹

The first major problem for the MKP in attempting to speak for the left in Hungarian society and the ruling coalition was that it was not the only political force that sought to represent it. In the countryside it faced the National Peasants Party (Nemzeti Parasztpárt – NPP) that was the authentic representative of 'populism', a variant of agrarian socialism based on a specific Hungarian 'third way' that had been advanced in the 1930s by some writers and large sections of the provincial intelligentsia. Though largely made up of intellectuals, it enjoyed some success in winning support among poorer peasants.⁷⁰ Furthermore, in the industrial centres it faced the MSZDP. In the elections in November 1945 the MSZDP had polled more votes than the Communists, and with some justice could claim to be a more authentic socialist party. The elections gave, however, a misleading impression of its strength. Weakened by the imprisonment of their leaders by the Germans in 1944 and damaged among sections of the industrial workforce by the conciliatory policies it had pursued towards the Horthy regime in the interwar years, it was only able to challenge the MKP for the allegiance of the working class in a limited number of

⁶⁷ Vida, *A Független Kisgazdapárt Politikája*, 113–7.

⁶⁸ Kovrig, *Communism in Hungary*, 161–9.

⁶⁹ Éva Szabó, 'A Magyar Kommunista Párt', in Tibor Erényi and Sándor Rákosi, eds., *Legyőzhetetlen Erő: A Magyar Kommunista Mozgalom Szervezeti Fejlődésének 50 Éve*, 2nd edn (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1974), 175.

⁷⁰ István Tóth, *A Nemzeti Parasztpárt története 1944–1948* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1972); Gábor Szirtes, *A 'gatyás kommunisták?' A Nemzeti Parasztpárt Baranyában 1945–1949* (Pécs: Pannónia Könyvek, 1993).

industrial sectors and factories.⁷¹ During the immediate postwar years the proportion of workers in its ranks fell, while 'the proportion of the university-educated, factory clerks, and employees increased considerably The MSDZP truly became a party of workers living from wages and salaries, the university-educated, white-collar staff, artisans, shopkeepers, and those belonging to the middle classes'.⁷² Its cross-class composition increasingly came to reflect the fact that at the local level it attracted those groups who supported forms of socialism but, for various reasons, disliked the MKP. The party was racked by tension between the pro-MKP stance of its leadership and the anti-communism of many of its activists. This tension would eventually lead the party to collapse into impotent disunity.⁷³

The second and most significant problem for the MKP, which it to some extent shared with the whole of the left, was that the election results combined with the dire economic situation had generated a crisis of legitimacy for their political project. The survival of their vision of the postwar state rested on the support of and the participation of the industrial working class in its local institutions. Electoral defeat fed a crisis of confidence among the industrial working class in the left-wing political leadership, which in turn was exacerbated by the effects of hyper-inflation on working-class living standards. This crisis was effectively one of legitimacy in that it raised the spectre of the collapse of the left's vision of the postwar state in the face of a triumphant centre-right and an outright withdrawal of working-class trust. In August 1945 workers' real wages stood at a mere 54 per cent of their 1939 level; by December they stood at only 13.8 per cent.⁷⁴ Inflation on this scale provoked resentment against those coming to sell their goods in the market, with workers and the authorities accusing them of 'speculation'.⁷⁵ Workers believed that a class of 'speculators' was enriching itself at their expense.⁷⁶ This contributed in turn to a feeling that the state was not sufficiently defending the workforce against 'speculation', 'reaction' and a resurgent prewar elite, a perception confirmed in the eyes of many workers by the election results. This fuelled a working-class rebellion against the MKP in the factories, as industry was hit by a wave of unofficial strikes which began as early as the summer of 1945, intensified throughout the autumn and continued into 1946. In one strike in one of the Ganz factories, of the plant's 280 MKP members only five refused to down tools and thus obey the party's anti-strike, pro-reconstruction line.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Pittaway, 'Workers in Hungary'; Erzsébet Strassenreiter, 'A Szociáldemokrata Párt az ország politikai életében (1944–1948)', *Múltunk*, 3 (1990), 114–28.

⁷² Erzsébet Strassenreiter, 'A szociáldemokrata tömegpárt szervezeti fellendülése és megerősödése (1944. Október – 1948. Június)', in Lajos Varga, ed., *A Magyar Szociáldemokrácia Kézikönyve* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 1999), 85.

⁷³ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.16/95ö.e., 28.

⁷⁴ Zoltán Baksay, *A Munkaerőhelyzet Alakulása és a Munkanelkülség Felszámolása Magyarországon, 1945–1949* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983), 26.

⁷⁵ 'Hogyan alakulnak a piaci árak?', *Szabad Újpest*, 18 Aug. 1945, 3.

⁷⁶ György Tolnai, 'Harc a Feketepiac Ellen', *Szakszervezeti Közlöny*, 15 Aug. 1945, 7.

⁷⁷ István Kovács, 'A Nagyüzemi kommunista pártszervezet munkájáról és feladatairól', *Pártmunka*, 15 Aug. 1945, 108.

As the FKgP attempted to press home its newly acquired electoral advantage in early 1946, the crisis of the left and the postwar state intensified. While the MKP remained in government through Soviet pressure, it was forced reluctantly to concede power and influence to the FKgP, which enjoyed a parliamentary majority. Beyond Budapest the pauperisation of the population had created a deep material and social crisis in many industrial areas.⁷⁸ According to local representatives of the left-wing parties in the Dorog coal fields in early 1946, ‘thirty-five fatal accidents have occurred as a direct consequence of the malnourishment of the workforce’.⁷⁹ This exacerbated class tension, for, as far as Tatabánya miners were concerned, ‘the democracy is good for the bosses, they are able to buy everything’.⁸⁰ The difficulties created for the left were underlined by the re-emergence of working-class antisemitism in response to the failure of the new state to tackle inflation; according to one Budapest textile worker, the miserable condition of the working population proved that ‘the Red Army only liberated the Jews’.⁸¹ MKP-initiated campaigns against ‘speculators’ during 1946 that were designed to deflect discontent revealed the tenuous hold that the party had over the working class. They erupted into violence; in the worst incident, in the industrial city of Miskolc, intensified campaigns against speculators resulted in the lynchings of managers of the local mill by a crowd of 5,000.⁸²

The MKP was forced to fight to regain the legitimacy its state-building project had gained from the industrial working class, through seeking to reintegrate its social base. This entailed a two-track strategy. It first concentrated on mobilising the workforce against the FKgP, both to secure its own political power within the coalition and to reassure its working-class base that it was committed to combating reaction. This strategy of legitimisation through mobilisation accepted the deep division of Hungarian society and sought to play on it. István Bibó noted in early 1946 that ‘two forms of fear’ tormented Hungarian society. They were ‘fear of a dictatorship of the proletariat and fear of reaction’.⁸³ The MKP used the widespread ‘fear of reaction’ to bind the left-wing parties and the trade unions into an alliance under its leadership in early 1946 and to mobilise its social base against the FKgP.⁸⁴ For Mátyás Rákosi the success of the FKgP was ‘the success of reaction’.⁸⁵ The MKP denied the legitimacy of the election by arguing that its victors were the enemies of ‘democracy’; Rákosi himself argued in 1946 that ‘as a consequence of the unconstrained havoc caused by the functioning of reactionaries inside the Smallholders’ Party the majority of

⁷⁸ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.12/120ö.e.,3–6, 19–22, 29–30, 37–8, 61–2.

⁷⁹ Miklós Habuda, *A Magyar Szakszervezetek a Népi Demokratikus Forradalomban, 1944–1948*, rev. and expanded 2nd edn (Budapest: Népszava Kiadó, 1986), 120.

⁸⁰ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.16/92ö.e., 49.

⁸¹ PtSzL, SZKL, Szaktanács (Trade Union National Council)/107d./1945, ‘Textilipari nagygyűlések szept. 19 és 20 an. Hangulat jelentés’, 1.

⁸² Palasik, *A jogállamiság megteremtésének kísérlete és kudarca Magyarországon*, 176–82.

⁸³ Bibó, ‘A magyar demokrácia válsága’, 27.

⁸⁴ ‘A Magyar Kommunista Párt, a Szociáldemokrata Párt, a Nemzeti Parasztpárt és a Szakszervezeti Tanács nyilatkozata az előretörő reakció elleni közös harcról’, in Balogh and Izsák, *Pártok és Pártprogrammok Magyarországon*, 263.

⁸⁵ Rákosi, *Visszaemlékezések 1940–1956. I kötet*, 218.

the party stands passionately against the socialist workers' parties and at one and the same time directly and clearly has come under the influence of the cartels, the banks and big capital'.⁸⁶ This stance was used to justify the recourse by the MKP to the use of blatantly undemocratic tactics against right-wing politicians. The MKP was able to rely on its control of the parallel security state and the support of the Soviets to continue with radical anti-fascist measures, despite the fact that parliament and government were dominated by their opponents. This was combined in the political sphere with the employment of the now notorious 'salami tactics' by the MKP against right-wing politicians, within the FKgP. The radicalism of the left's constituency was mobilised to demand a continuance of anti-fascist administrative measures. The security forces were used to root out 'conspiracy' among right-wing politicians, and Rákosi, with consummate political skill and Soviet support, was able to bully the Smallholders into accepting new ultimatums. 'Salami tactics' were to destroy the political coalition that the 1945 FKgP represented by initially forcing the leadership to expel its right wing and then to attack its centre in 1947.

The second track of the left's response was to address the problem of working-class living standards directly. In the first half of 1946 the state, under pressure from the left, attempted with only partial success to protect the value of workers' incomes from the effects of inflation by paying wages partly in kind and linking money wages to the price of foodstuffs.⁸⁷ When the government moved to end hyper-inflation with a radical stabilization package that involved the introduction of a new currency, the forint, in August 1946, the left-wing parties successfully fought to protect the living standards of industrial workers and tied them to a wage system which embodied the ideology of democratic, national reconstruction. The new wage system forced every factory to establish a norm for each worker; this norm was to be set at 75 per cent of 1938 production in the same workplace. Thus the norm was statistically established from historical company records. The link between the production target and past production was made explicit. As a reward for fulfilling the norm an *akkord* was to be paid; this was based on a wage scale based on the fulfilment of this norm. It was steeply progressive and designed to use inequality of earnings based on production as a motivating factor.⁸⁸ The shifts in the wage system that accompanied 'stabilisation' did largely succeed in re-cementing the relationship between the MKP and its working-class base, as well as generating new appeal for the ideology of 'democratic, national reconstruction'. In the year following 'stabilisation' the large increases in wages that the progressive nature of the *akkord* stimulated combined with

⁸⁶ Mátyás Rákosi, 'A Népi Demokrácia Útja', in Rákosi, *Válogatott Beszédék és Cikkek*, 150.

⁸⁷ György Csátár and Ferenc Martin, *A Munkabér és a Munkanormák Kérdései* (Budapest: Szikra Kiadó, 1955), 60–1; *A Magyar Szabad Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége (Szakszervezeti Tanács) Jelentése a XVII Küldöttközgyűlésnek* (Budapest: Szakszervezeti Tanács, 1948), 37; PtSzL, SZKL, Szaktanács/18d./1946. PtSzL, PIL, 274f.12/120ö.e., 101.

⁸⁸ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.12/120ö.e., 67–8; PtSzL, PIL, 274f.12/121ö.e., 33–4; *ibid.*, 76; PtSzL, SZKL, Szaktanács/106d./1946, 'Magyarázat a progresszív bérezésre', 2; PtSzL, SZKL, Szaktanács/18d./1946, 'Vasipari bérezés'.

controlled prices of many basic goods to produce substantial rises in working-class real incomes.⁸⁹ The relationship between the MKP and the working class was, however, still characterised by problems. There was impatience at the continuation of private ownership in industry and the continuity of managerial personnel where companies had been nationalised. In Tatabánya's nationalised mines workers in the first half of 1947 'complained that headquarters is absolutely full of reactionaries'.⁹⁰ While this kind of discontent was a concern, it fed a situation in which the MKP's use of undemocratic measures against the FKgP at national level was seen as legitimate by industrial workers.⁹¹ Discontent at the poor supply of foodstuffs to industrial areas remained a problem; consequently anti-smallholder opinion remained strong among workers.⁹² By far the biggest issue that undermined support for the left, however, was unemployment, which rose from 31,000 in August 1946 to 116,000 by December 1947.⁹³

Though officially registered unemployment affected the industrial working class, unregistered unemployment hit the rural poor. In the far south-east of the country in early 1947, according to MKP organisers, 'unemployment, inflation... and the supply of bread were at the centre of public attention... in more than one place these have led to demonstrations'.⁹⁴ These problems had not begun in 1947, however, and as the rural poor represented a significant constituency for the left, their support had been fundamental. The rural poor were the product of the failure of land reform in eastern Hungary to guarantee everyone an adequate plot of land.⁹⁵ The landless were natural supporters of the left and local FKgP activists regarded them with disdain, an attitude rooted in the divisions of class and status prevalent in rural communities. As one resident of the east Hungarian village of Tiszaigar remembered, 'an agricultural labourer, a manorial servant went in vain to the Smallholders' Party... They didn't do anything'.⁹⁶

The attack on the FKgP at the national level was combined with an MKP campaign in rural areas that accused the FKgP of seeking a reversal of land reform under the slogan, 'We Will Not Give the Land Back!'. The campaign was one of militant support for new landowners who farmed on the very edge of subsistence. They also moved to institute a second wave of land reform that was based on the expulsion of the country's ethnic German population and the redistribution of their land to those left landless in 1945.⁹⁷ The 1946 expulsion of 116,959 ethnic Germans from

⁸⁹ Szakszervezeti Tanács Gazdasági és Statisztikai Közlönye (Feb.–March 1947), 2.

⁹⁰ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.16/94ö.e., 53.

⁹¹ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.16/95ö.e., 14.

⁹² PtSzL, SZKL, Vasas/137d./1947, 'Gazdasági helyzetünk 1947. Október elején', 1.

⁹³ Pető and Szakács, *A hazai gazdaság*, 72.

⁹⁴ PtSzL, PIL, 274f.16/95ö.e., 14.

⁹⁵ Katalin Tausz, *Cselédek és 'Továbbszolgáló Cselédek' Tiszigaron* (Budapest: Művelődési Minisztérium Marxizmus-Leninizmus Oktatási Fosztálya, 1981), 47; Pál Závada, *Kulákprés: Család- és falutörténeti szociográfia. Tótkomlós 1945–1956* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi-Széphalom Könyvkiadó, 1991), 66; Gábor Vági, *Mezőhegyes* (Budapest: Századvég Kiadó, 1994), 80.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Tausz, *Cselédek és 'Továbbszolgáló Cselédek'*, 52.

⁹⁷ 'A földhözjuttatottak országos kongresszusának határozatai: követelik a földreform és az újgazdák megsegítését', in Somlyai, *Földreform 1945*, 480–4.

Hungary was explicitly linked to land reform as their lands, mostly in the west of the country, were redistributed to the landless poor from the east.⁹⁸ Measures such as resettlement and continued land redistribution allowed the left-wing parties to retain the loyalty of the rural poor in the face of desperate economic circumstances. They did not, however, solve the basic problems of the rural poor in class-divided rural communities across the country. Villages continued to be divided between poor smallholders and wealthier farmers.⁹⁹

Conclusion: the politics of legitimacy and the social roots of dictatorship

A focus on what has been termed the politics of legitimacy – namely, the ways in which the attempts of Hungary's leading political actors to legitimate their rule played out among subordinate social groups – has shed considerable light on the social history of politics during the country's transitional moment. It has shown how long-term political affiliations rooted in divisions of culture, politics and class in a deeply divided society provided a backdrop that conditioned responses to the immediate postwar context. These patterns of long-term political identification were not unchanging, however, and responded in a dynamic fashion to the social transformations that occurred during the Second World War and the first postwar months. These transformations, as the impact of land reform on the transformation of Hungarian conservatism has shown, were often not those intended by political actors. Shifting patterns of political identification both limited the freedom of manoeuvre of political actors and determined the extent to which those actors were able to construct a degree of legitimacy for themselves.

This focus has also shed light on the problems encountered by the postwar regime in its relations with Hungarian society. It underscores the limits to the legitimisation of the left-wing project of an anti-fascist, socially radical 'democracy', given the restricted social base that the left's project could depend on in 1945. This was due to the existence of alternative political traditions that either opposed or were excluded by the left's attempts at postwar state building. State formation and the clash between the left and other political traditions produced division, which formed the background to the struggle for legitimacy that ensued following the failure of the left to legitimate its vision of the new political system through free elections. This failure occurred because of the restricted social base of its project, but also because an alternative project that rested on a new, democratised conservatism proved able to mobilise those political traditions that were either opposed to or neglected by the left.

Faced with this rejection at the ballot box, the MKP and its allies shifted the focus of their attempts to legitimate their rule, arguing that their opponents stood for 'reaction' against the 'people'. This strategy rested on the deep-seated division in Hungarian society between those who embraced a socialist vision of the country's future and those who espoused a renewed, democratised conservatism. It also fed on their mutual distrust. From late 1945 the MKP abandoned the pretence that

⁹⁸ Ágnes Tóth, *Migrationen in Ungarn 1945–1948: Vertreibung der Ungarndeutschen, Binnenwanderungen und Slowakisch-Ungarischer Bevölkerungsaustausch*, trans. Rita Fejér (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001).

⁹⁹ József Rózsa, 'Tard, 1947', *Forum* (1947), 535–45.

it sought to represent the people as a whole, instead focusing its efforts on the supporters of socialist transformation and labelling their opponents as 'reactionaries', and thus enemies of democracy. While this shift in the focus of the MKP's strategy of legitimation does not in and of itself prove that the future political development of Hungary was determined in 1945, it does suggest that the FKgP's election victory set in train a logic that created the social roots of dictatorship. While the MKP was able to limit the impact of the FKgP's parliamentary majority through its control over the security services and Soviet control over the Allied Control Commission, it mobilised its supporters as a means of legitimating its political goals.

Hungary's transitional moment ended with the destruction of the FKgP's parliamentary majority under the impact of 'salami tactics' and the subsequent semi-rigged elections of August 1947, which gave the MKP the status of the country's largest political force.¹⁰⁰ By that point the left had secured its political hegemony, while it had established the economic and social institutions of the 'new democracy'. The country had a mixed economy characterised by state control of the banks, mining and heavy industry governed by the Three-Year Plan, which aimed to complete the process of postwar reconstruction and increase living standards. This was by no means a Soviet system; much of industry and commerce remained in private hands, and relations between the state and private industry were often characterised by conflict over the issues of planning and state intervention. Society was more pacified than it had been during the upheavals of the period between 1944 and 1946. Yet, worryingly for the left, social divisions were increasing. For experienced farmers who had benefited from land reform, the late 1940s were good years, whereas in many rural communities there was a marked social polarisation as poorer and less experienced recipients of land found it increasingly difficult to keep up. In addition, there were those who had missed out on the land reform altogether, because of a shortage of land, because they had been prisoners of war, or because of their ethnicity. Unemployment, both industrial and agricultural, was extremely high.¹⁰¹

As the state embarked on the task of a further transition from Popular Front regime to socialist dictatorship in late 1947 and early 1948, it was clear that the politics of legitimacy that constrained the MKP during the Popular Front years would shape the dictatorship that followed it. The state was based on the effective exclusion of

¹⁰⁰ Of the parties who also contested the 1945 elections, the MKP polled 22.3 per cent in 1947, the FKgP 15.4 per cent, the MSZDP 14.9 per cent, the NPP 8.3 per cent, the Hungarian Radical Party 1.7 per cent and the Bourgeois Democratic Party 0.7 per cent. Right-wing parties which had either not been formed or had been barred from participating in 1945 were allowed to compete in 1947. These filled the vacuum created by the collapse of the FKgP's 1945 electoral coalition: the Democratic People's Party polled 16.4 per cent, the Hungarian Independence Party 13.4 per cent, the Independent Hungarian Democratic Party 5.2 per cent and the Christian Women's Camp 1.4 per cent (the statistics are adapted from Károly Szerencsés, *A Kékcédulás Hadművelet: Választások Magyarországon 1947* (Budapest: IKVA, 1992), 73).

¹⁰¹ Sándor, *Híradás a Pusztaórlól*, 44–73; Lampland, *The Object of Labor*, 129–31; Baksay, *A Munkaerőhelyzet Alakulása*, 58–201; Gyula Belényi, *Az Alföldi Városok és a Településpolitika (1945–1963)* (Szeged: Csongrád Megyei Levéltár, 1996), 57–71.

the political centre-right and its broad base of support. Furthermore, its political base lay among classes that were clearly subordinate and would have to be mobilised around radical demands for greater social justice. Of necessity this locked the left into a social logic that inexorably strengthened the dictatorial and repressive nature of the emerging state, one that complemented the internal and external political processes that were forcing a change of gear in communist policies across central and eastern Europe from summer 1947.