Four Reasons Why Illiberal Politics Appropriated the Memory of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

Andrea Pető

03.02.2025 doi: 10.59704/37ce561a217f0157

"If we take '56 as a starting point, we probably would not have done what President Zelensky did two and a half years ago, because it is irresponsible, because he seems to have put his country on the defensive in a war." These words of Viktor Orbán's political director, Balázs Orbán (unrelated), completed the process of turning the government of Hungary, which was occupied by Russian/Soviet troops four times in the 19th and 20th century (1849, 1914,1944-45 and 1956), from anti-Russian, anti-Soviet to pro-Putin-Russian in less than a decade.

The advice to surrender to the occupying Russian forces instead of resisting came as no surprise, considering the international expectations of heroism were low as far as the pro-Putinist Hungarian government was concerned.

However, using 1956 as a historical analogy with present Ukraine fighting for its existence against Russia nevertheless surprised quite a few observers. The 1956 revolution was an uprising of the Hungarian People against its Soviet-subordinated government and evolved as part of the series of anti-communist uprisings in Soviet-occupied Europe. It lasted only 13 days before being crushed by Soviet forces – too short for the internal conflicts and paradoxes to play out publicly. For a long time, the idea that anti-communism was a legitimization basis of newly founded democracies after 1989 seemed to be unchallenged even by illiberal memory politics until recently. It is no accident that Ursula von der Leyen asked at a meeting of the European Parliament in Strasbourg without naming Orbán: "There are still some who blame this war not on Putin's lust for power but on Ukraine's thirst for freedom, so I want to ask them: would they ever blame the Hungarians for the Soviet invasion in 1956?".

To gain an insight into the reconceptualization and reframing of the 1956 revolution in illiberal Hungary, it is first necessary to acknowledge the obvious fact that no individual or political party can claim exclusive "ownership" of the memories associated with any historical event. The concept of appropriation by Michel de Certeau helps underline that the consumption of history is never a passive process, and different groups could demand the ownership of an event. Producers of memory are incorporating their own meanings and values into the consumption of culture and that amounts simultaneously to revising culture.

In this contribution, I am analysing the reasons for the appropriation of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. I argue that these reasons are four-fold: *First*, the memory of 1956 has been divided from the start. *Second*, half of the population, namely women, were excluded from this memory. *Third*, the revolution was a bottom-up event. *Fourth*, the transition after 1990 was built on the concept of authenticity and truth made the narrative vulnerable to illiberal appropriation.

1956: A divided memory from the start

The history of 1956 was tabooed before 1989 as the Kádár regime, leading Hungary from 1956 to 1989, was founded on the crushed revolution in collaboration with the Soviets. Their frame of history writing was heavily ideological and labelled the 1956 revolution as a 'counter-revolution'. With this, the regime aimed to fill up the rhetorical space about the events. At the same time, politics enforced historical amnesia on the revolution with effective censorship, imprisonment, and, from the 1960s, a concession to consume while other parts of the Soviet Block lacked essential goods. Bloody oppression led to the largest wave of migration

of 200,000 men and women from Hungary in four months. The deal to consume instead of doing politics led to the much-admired model of "Goulash communism". It was constitutive in forgetting, omission, and amnesia as tools for successfully depoliticizing Hungarian society after 1956. The anti-communist emigration tried to keep its interpretation alive, and since 1989, several competing versions of memorialization have been present. This factor makes the memory of the 1956 revolution an easy target for appropriation by the current government as no original ideas of thinking was needed, just a quick rewarming of what has been the legacy and cultural patterns of collaboration of the Kadar regime.

1956: A history of giving up on half of the population

Women were fighters, nurses, and politicians in 1956. However, Hungarian emigres wrote a history of 1956 without a particular interest in women, as their primary framework of interpretation was anti-communism and political history. Women were present in history as wives and daughters of critical male politicians, not worthy of the attention of historians, if only as mirrors of the activity of great men.

The figure of the armed women fighters was disturbing the imagination of social order, and there was not much discussion about women as leaders, fighters, or politicians either. Women's agency and autonomy were non-topics. The 1956 Revolution was also fought against communist emancipatory politics, and it was, in several aspects, a conservative revolution. Demands of the workers' councils, such as to ban liberal abortion laws in Hungary with a nationalist pro-natalist agenda labeling the right to abortion as a communist trick to destroy the nation, were not even really discussed during important debates about redefining reproductive rights after 1989. Women's absence from the historiography of the 1956 Revolution led the illiberal regime to include women in the narrative of "national feminism".

I did anonymised interviews with the at that time emerging far-right politicians in early 2000. In their life stories, conservative and far-right female politicians entering political life after 1989 narrated 1956 as a turning point: the moment they became anti-communists. Therefore, the memory of 1956 was more empowering for conservative and far-right female politicians than for progressive ones. Remarkable female politicians were rare during communism and in the democratic opposition. For the few female politicians on the progressive side, it was not an option to relate to the events of 1956 as they had a solid anti-communist agenda. Therefore progressive politics failed to relate critically to the statist communist period. The rhetoric of anti-communism was successfully used to discredit the traditions and values of progressive politics. This made it possible for the illiberal regime to quasi-capture the historical role of women and squeeze them into the narrative of "national feminism".

1956: Not only an elite-driven revolution presented as a revolution of the elite

After 1989, one might wrongly assume that the collapse of communism brought about a significant change in the historical narrative of 1956. However, forced amnesia, together with a meta-narrative of "counter-revolution", have produced a variety of conflicting meanings to 1956, which became already visible during the festive reburial of Imre Nagy, the executed Prime Minister on 16th June 1989. Stefan Auer warns about a peaceful real political dilemma regarding the legacy of 1956 in 1989. Namely, how to relate to a peaceful, mass-driven revolution of 1956 defeated violently by the Red Army by a regime like that of 1989, which had been set up through peaceful roundtable negotiations. Intellectuals, being the driving force of the 1989 transition, were advocating for the concept of a "self–limiting revolution", not to give space for "revolutionary" ideas, solutions, or violence and to "return to normality" as soon as possible based on the concept of "anti-politics."

For Hannah Arendt, 1956 was an example of a "spontaneous revolution", a concept coined by Rosa Luxemburg. This was as far as possible away from the ideals and values of the participants of the Hungarian Roundtable Talks, who were setting the script for the transition to democracy. Popular memory of the "boys

of Pest", very young, working-class men who were fighting with weapons against the occupying Red Army in 1956 was sidelined in canonized historiography of 1956 after 1989 as being an example of political radicalism.

The post-1989 neoliberalisation of Hungary was based on stripping workers of their rights and privatizing their property, slicing up the trade union movement. This transformation was led by political parties creating apolitical neoliberal subjects, not by a popular movement. Worker's councils played a key role in 1956 and were praised by Arendt as alternatives to the party system. Workers during the elite-driven roundtable discussions were not powerful actors as the transition process was driven by political parties and not by movements or by trade unions.

1956: The authentic "truth" narrative

After 1989, there was a great public need for consumption and appropriation of the past and for informational compensation, which led to the opening of previously closed archives. In this paradigm, testimonies serve as authentic and true memories as opposed to the allegedly elite-driven, manipulated narratives. Families and the private sphere were the sites where it was hoped that the state could not penetrate them and where identity formation defining "us" and "them" in an authentic and essentialized way took place. The family was also the site that was the most resistant to communist emancipation and served as a resource where expectations regarding femininity and masculinity have not changed much. Due to the continuity of gender stereotypes in family memory, the history of 1956 has become the family story of heroic men and loving female relatives who also suffered but cared for their beloved sons and partners, which fits to the illiberal so called "family-friendly" ideology.

Conclusion: Appropriation of 1956 version 2.0

It is encouraging that the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 was a critical event that formed the identity of several generations. The recent hijacking by illiberal forces is just one step in the long process of appropriations. The anti-communist PM Orbán turned out to be pro-Putin. What is considered "cool" or acceptable can shift and change depending on the context and on who can offer innovative and convincing alternatives in the future. Péter Magyar, the rising opposition leader in Hungary, on 23 October 2024, invoked and claimed the legacy of the "boys of Pest". In his present struggle against FIDESZ and Orbán for power, Magyar employs a rhetorical strategy that the latter used against the old, corrupt, and non-patriotic communists in 1956. Magyar should be in a hurry with the Appropriation of the Memory of 1956 Revolution 2.0 version, as the forthcoming general elections in 2026 are less than 15 months away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Pető

Andrea Pető is a historian and a Professor at the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Vienna, Austria, a Research Affiliate of the Central European University's Democracy Institute, Budapest, and a Doctor of Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Pető, Andrea: Four Reasons Why Illiberal Politics Appropriated the Memory of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Verfassungsblog, 03.02.2025, doi: 10.59704/37ce561a217f0157.

Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20250204-192229-0.