FEATURED REVIEW


Why did Ernő Gerő mention Gierichev in his March 11, 1953 letter to the Soviet ambassador on the manufacturing of artillery percussion caps? The solution to this mystery (or the lack thereof) exemplifies the difficulties that Magdolna Baráth faced while writing this book, which fills a lacuna in the secondary literature. The literature on Soviet advisors raises novel questions about the fall of communism. Before the change of regimes, very little was accessible apart from the rather stereotypical information on the anecdotal presence of Soviet citizens working in national security and armed bodies (which is the subject of the “Room of Soviet Advisors” in the so-called House of Terror museum in Budapest, which opened its doors to the public in 2002). Since the archives were partially or completely opened after 1989, the examination of this complex phenomenon could begin with the following core questions: what professional connections were made, and how did these connections change over time between the Soviet Union and the countries in its sphere of influence, or, in Baráth’s terminology, the “satellite countries”? The advisors and the experts under scrutiny in this inquiry doubtlessly played key roles in this process.

One of the key virtues of the volume is that it places terminological issues in a wider historical context. It shows that different kinds of experts and advisors arrived between 1945–48, 1948–53, and 1953–56 and then again from 1956 into the 1960s and beyond. The first group of advisors worked for the police forces and the counter-intelligence services. The next groups consisted of Soviet experts active in all walks of life, who as industrial spies, integrated commissars, experts, or intermediaries contributed to the Sovietization of the country in various ways. What kinds of answers emerge from the analysis of this process?

First, these experts were needed in part because the previous elite had been compromised, had emigrated for political reasons, had been sidelined, or, worse, had been imprisoned. A great merit of Baráth’s volume is that it provides the exact number of Soviet citizens active in Hungary, including details concerning who worked where and in what positions, and it thereby dispels the myth that Soviet advisors arrived in throngs to Hungary. In effect, their numbers were
in the double-digits only. Though they were miniscule in number, however, their influence was exponentially large. This is why Baráth’s findings will have a stimulating effect on further research concerning Hungarian intellectual collaboration.

For the second problem which prompted the installment of Soviet experts, there is a particular expression in Russian: *comchvanstvo*, or “communist arrogance,” which derives from the so-called Chekist attitude. At the beginning of the 1920s, the Soviet Union had to face the fact that despite its hopes (or what the Soviets considered an objective historical inevitability), in all likelihood no other countries would choose the true path of communism for several decades, and thus the country would remain solitary in a hostile environment. The response of the party leadership was the construction of a strong and controlling state apparatus, and the total mobilization of all human and material resources in the interest of economic and social development. The Soviet Union could implement this process only by assuming the self-assured commitment of those on the right side of history. This self-assurance, which grew with their victory in World War II, engendered the Bolshevik professional-revolutionary, who had already been acculturated in the atmosphere of political repression, whose theoretical knowledge was grounded in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, but who also possessed practical, applicable expertise.

This type of “homo sovieticus” appeared in Hungary with stunning salaries. They earned 4,000-7,000 forints per month when the average income was 200-300 forints, and they were given apartments, had access to specialized stores to meet their needs and wants, and received reimbursements and other benefits, such as free fishing licenses. However, these privileges were not guaranteed for everyone, nor were they guaranteed at all times. The process of issuance was a long and tedious bureaucratic ordeal, which, fortunately for the historian, produced a wealth of sources. Baráth’s volume allows the reader to trace clearly how, until 1953 (the year of Stalin’s death), the number of Soviet advisors and experts grew continuously, as did the number of privileges they were accorded.

During the 1956 Revolution, all of these “experts,” with the exception of those working for the state security forces, were evacuated by plane to Soviet army barracks. After this event, less money was spent on the operating costs of Soviet advisors. At the same time, they were commanded to take seriously the instructions they had been given after 1953: not to interfere with the inner affairs of the country or of their workplaces, which led to a direct decrease in their political and professional influence.
During the 1960s, i.e. the glorious era of Soviet technical advancement, when for a short time it seemed that the Soviets would emerge superior from the technological competition with the Americans, scientific and technological exchange flourished. However, by the 1970s, Soviet self-confidence was undermined by more frequent interactions with consumer societies of the West, the actual winner of the technological competition. From this time on, the Soviet Union’s participation in world trade was more or less limited to the selling of raw materials. This is how the concept of the “Soviet professional” changed over time: first, it signified a highly powerful agent backed by the world-leading knowhow of the Soviet secret services; later, it meant a well-paid foreign expert of percussion cap production; and finally, the so-called expert was little more than a door-to-door agent of ridiculously outdated technology, tolerated only for ideological reasons. At the same time, the secret service cooperation, which had begun in 1944 and had continued to develop throughout the period in question remained effective.

The question of whether there was a master plan for the Sovietization of Eastern European countries or whether it took place as a reaction to the Marshall Plan is the subject of long-standing debate in the literature. This book, which offers a study of the similarities and differences between the functions and acts of the Soviet advisors in the various countries of the Eastern Bloc (i.e. within a comparative Eastern European framework), shows that during the advancement of the Red Army into Eastern Europe, the Soviets used the method of obtaining a system of influence, which had already proven effective in Mongolia, – while after 1944 they reacted in an ad hoc manner to the challenges they had to confront. These ad hoc reactions in turn led to chaos and the need for micro-management, as illustrated by Gerő’s personal intervention in percussion cap production.

Another issue that should be analyzed concerning the functions of Soviet advisors and professionals in Hungary concerns the kinds of changes introduced into the Hungarian professional world by the presence of Soviet advisors, who only rarely enjoyed the appreciation of their Hungarian colleagues, for instance in the case of Russian foreign language assistants or in areas of expertise in which Hungarians were less advanced, such as the nuclear industry. It was clear that the Soviets saw their work in Hungary as a well-paid assignment, and they not only tried to mobilize every possible financial resource, but they were also unwilling to return to the Soviet Union. In addition, since Soviet citizens had a direct link to their Embassy, they could remove Hungarian professionals who
did not support their work or raised objections to their presence. Furthermore, much as Gerő directly interfered with percussion cap production, the most insignificant affairs, such as the issuance of a fishing license, were also taken care of at the highest levels (to the great delight of the historian). Today, historians are grateful that even these kinds of cases were dealt with at the highest levels, since they produced sources which offer insights into the power relations and intrigues of the era.

As Baráth shows, the presence of Soviet professionals had a significant effect on the workplace. On the one hand, these experts, who were provided generous funding from the Hungarian government budget, represented an external human resource; on the other, by employing Soviets, one could score political points and build a support network. The volume outlines some very interesting strategies deployed by Hungarian leaders to maximize their gains from the presence of Soviet advisors, while they at the same time tried to minimize the damage caused by the Soviets’ lack of expertise, which at times was glaring. For instance, the University of Physical Education requested an expert for the Department of Sport’s History, where the assigned “expert” would be least likely to cause a disturbance; the professors at ELTE (who had already ridden out many political storms) artfully managed to avoid a situation in which Soviets who had just received their degree were at once appointed to serve as university professors in Budapest (these same Hungarian university professors were often willing to host staff to help in Russian language instruction). Both the party apparatus and professionals utilized the Soviet advisors in their power struggles. Rákosi once quite spectacularly expressed his concern for the “ailing health” of Gábor Péter in front of Soviet advisors, thus undermining his rival. Comparable scenes of subtle resistance took place on lower levels too, where the advisors were not provided with the right materials, information was held back from them, or what was done was the exact opposite of what had been advised. The presence of Soviet advisors in Hungary thus had an immense effect on how politics and ideologies intermingled with knowledge, as well as on everyday patterns of behavior.

Baráth has performed an enormous task: she has examined every Hungarian archive and every accessible Russian archive and collection of documents for data on Soviet advisors and professionals. It is laudable that she expresses her gratitude in a collegial manner to all those who helped her in this lengthy process. However, the abundance of sources also represents the greatest unresolved issue of the book. Baráth accurately introduces all the information
at her disposal, and she marks with precision incidences in which she could not trace the follow up history of an official document or in which there was no more data in a given archive concerning the issue at hand (for instance, we may never know who Gierichev, the master of percussion cap production, was, why he came to Hungary, what his professional background was, or what happened to him afterwards). Still, the reader at times feels inundated with specific details found in the sources and presented without contextualization. Furthermore, Baráth appears to take the same position regarding the reliability of her sources. Memoirs, such as the memoirs of Béla Király, are to be approached with serious source criticism, because Király, like so many other memoir-authors, tuned his account of his own former stances to real or perceived expectations at the time of writing. Memoirs clearly cannot be used or cited as if they had the same status and value as a consular report, for instance. At the same time, memoirs, along with interviews (for instance), can shed light on issues on which there are no other accessible sources. Furthermore, they offer examples of the wide array of reactions people in contact with the Soviets had.

A central question concerns how to evaluate the role of Soviet advisors and the economic policies they introduced to Hungary. In the 1920s, heavy industry was forcibly developed in the Soviet Union with sources stolen from agriculture, a process which Trotskyist economist Yevgeni Preobrazhenski (1886–1937) described as “primitive socialist accumulation.” In her summary, Baráth approvingly quotes György Gyarmati, who refers to the post-1945 era in Hungary as “the dictatorship of modernization”. Indeed, it was primarily Hungarian agriculture that suffered from the enforcement of Soviet methods alien to the climate and soil of the country, like the growing of cotton and rubber root, or the irrigation systems. The Soviet-style development of heavy industry was against economic rationality and even common sense, and it served as a tool with which the regime built Soviet political control. From the outset, the system was doomed to slow economic growth, and the system of direct administrative control was incapable of spurring growth and at the same time maintaining quality. Furthermore, the economy was endangered by the country’s large military expenditures. According to Martin Malia, this system was an “ideocracy,” led by ideology instead of rational planning in order to achieve utopian goals. The advisors, experts, and correspondents played their own roles in the attempted realization of this utopia, building, as the documents show, a ”new traditionalism” in Hungary, instead of modernity. The great role played by personal connections (one recalls the relationship between Gerő and Gierichev),
the camarilla-style politics, the pervasiveness of reporting, the hierarchical system, and the clientelism all acted against modernization (understood as impersonal, effective, specialized, and functional knowledge) and suited well the neo-baroque world of Horthyism that continued to flourish despite the political cleansings and all the apparent changes.

The development of the Soviet sphere of interest long remained a story focused on a small party of secret service experts. Magdolna Baráth’s research broadens the scope of and adds further nuances to this narrative. This splendidly written volume, which rests on the thorough study of primary sources, together with accurate annotations, shows that the process was indeed part of international history, and that despite all of the difficulties encountered while researching (such as the inaccessibility of Russian archives), it is a human story too. Perhaps someday we may even learn who Gierichev was.

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