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WOMEN, GENDER, AND POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT IN THE HUNGARIAN SIBERIA, 1919–1924[*]

Abstract

The incarceration of those determined to be security risks was a common feature of the wartime regimes of most European belligerents throughout the Great War. Yet, especially in several of the Habsburg successor states, internment and politicised incarceration continued as the war morphed into smaller wars, revolutions, and counterrevolutions. This paper traces the social history of political incarceration in Hungary between approximately 1914–1924, with special attention to the post-armistice period, during which wartime emergency laws were extended or revised to deal with political upheaval and renewed regional warfare. Within this framework, the paper focuses on the experience of one woman, a university-educated teacher, who became a leading leftist educator and was imprisoned for her role in the Hungarian Republic of Councils (also called the Hungarian Soviet Republic) in 1920. She left Hungary for the Soviet Union in the 1920s as part of a prisoner exchange, and she remained there until the end of World War Two. She later returned to Hungary, and in 1953, published a memoir about her experiences during World War One and its aftermath. Using a gendered analysis to move from the larger context to the individual experience helps reveal continuity and change from Hungary's Great War to its "war after war," as well as the systematic and improvised nature of carceral deprivation and violence against female political prisoners. It also shows how the gendered memories of the Long World War One inflected the post-1945 socialist party's ideological mobilisation of women, putting forward an example of socialist womanhood that simultaneously challenged and reinforced the categories of prisoners and activists.

Keywords: Hungary, Hungarian Soviet Republic, Postwar society, gender, political imprisonment

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> "The prison world: outside yellow barren walls, barred windows, a house of the dead; inside: embarrassment and mockery, the suppressed will, seething tension, murderous hatred and comradely help, anguished struggle and hope: the underground front of the freedom fight."[1]

Gizella Berzeviczy, the author of the words above, was an educator and activist in the workers' movement who had taught in schools across pre-war Hungary. Born into an old noble family whose name had become associated with the "enlightened" rule of Joseph II in the eighteenth century and with Hungary's educational development, Gizella Berzeviczy earned a university degree in Budapest in 1902, and she taught in schools in cities and towns across Hungary. She became increasingly engaged in politics and, like several other well-to-do figures active in intellectual circles, Berzeviczy joined the communist party after its founding in late 1918. During the Hungarian Republic of Councils (*Tanácsköztársaság*; also translated as Hungarian Soviet Republic), she became the director of the Erzsébet School for Women in Budapest and was also heavily involved in pedagogical activities related to the educational goals of the Councils government helmed by Béla Kun.

In 1920, she was tried and sentenced to eight years in prison for the incitement of class and religious conflict but was released in 1922 to the Soviet Union as part of a prisoner exchange.[2] During her years in the Soviet Union, she continued her career as a teacher in Odesa (Ukraine), and when the war began, she continued to teach prisoners Marxist-Leninism in camps. She was evacuated to Central Asia during the Second World War, and she returned to Hungary after the conflict, spending her remaining years lecturing and writing about her life and work until her death in 1954, after which she continued to be celebrated as an early member of the Hungarian workers' movement, though one who has received little attention from scholars. One of the books she published in her final years was a memoir of her time in prison during the counterrevolution.

The life of Gizella Berzeviczy was remarkable because of her background as well as her unshakeable commitment to communism and education throughout persecution, exile, and war that marked the second half of her life. Yet, in other ways, Berzeviczy was one of many people whose lives were altered by the events that unfolded in Hungary's "war after the war." Thousands of people were incarcerated in prisons and camps across the truncated country in the months and years that followed the collapse of the Republic of Councils. This essay investigates Berzeviczy's story in terms of both its distinctiveness and its representativeness of the larger social and political processes that engulfed Hungary after 1918. It pays particular attention to the gender of politically motivated incarceration as illustrated by her memoir, *Márianosztra: Prison Memories from the Years of White*

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[1] Gizella Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra: Börtönemlékek a fehérterror éveiből* (Budapest: Szépiodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1953 [1948]), 9.

[2] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 5–9. See also entry on Berzeviczy in the *Magyar életrajzi lexicon*: "Berzeviczy Gizella," *Magyar életrajzi lexicon*, accessed 15 April 2020, https://www.arcanum.hu/en/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-eletrajzi-lexikon-7428D/b-74700/berzeviczy-gizella-74B9E/.

Terror (Márianosztra: Börtönemlékek a fehér-terror éveiből), a Stalinist-era memoir of her time in a Hungarian women's prison. It also examines her final years in Hungary during the construction of the state socialist regime, when she achieved some prominence for her political activism in the field of education.

A contextualised analysis of the content and publication of her memoir brings the two eras of her political life in Hungary together and reveals the often gendered and classed nature of deprivation and violence in prisons, especially against female political prisoners. Though the source must be treated with care given its timing both in the sense of its distance from the events it describes and the political context in which it was published, it still provides insight into how politically active women understood themselves and what had happened to them. It also shows how the gendered memories of the long World War One inflected the post-1945 socialist party's ideological mobilisation of women, advancing an example of socialist womanhood that simultaneously challenged and reinforced ideas about women's roles in the movement.

Politically Motivated Incarceration during Hungary's Long World War One

Like many countries, Hungary had wartime emergency laws on the books that were enforced during World War One. A legal architecture of internment and house arrest was established, and targeted "enemy aliens" and civilians deemed threatening to the nation's war effort. Across belligerents, these forms of regulation often entailed some form of suspended *habeas corpus* and due process, and those targeted were often in political movements that ideologically opposed the war.

Hungary was already in political and social turmoil as defeat loomed and the Habsburg empire collapsed, and successive revolutions rocked the country back and forth and back again. The social democratic government led by Mihály Károly proved incapable of satisfying the western Great Powers or the population, nor could it tamp down political challenges on the left and the right, even with expanded policing powers. By late February 1919, a law was issued that permitted the "surveillance and detention of those deemed dangerous to the community", which was especially oriented toward those who continued to support the Habsburgs as kings of Hungary.[3] Politically motivated internment continued during the Hungarian Soviet Republic, though it is difficult to get a sense of how many people were incarcerated during this period, in part because the communist government sought full-scale reform of the penal system. Political violence also escalated as "red terror" and renewed warfare with Hungary's neighbours erupted, and counterrevolutionary “whites” organised in the eastern reaches of the country.

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[3] Tamás Kovács, "Az internálás mint rendészeti válasz állambiztonsági és államrendészeti kihivásokra 1919–1945 között," *A Pécsi Határõr Tudományos Közlemények hivatalos honlapja* vol. XIII (2012), accessed 11 July 2014, http://www.pecshor.hu/periodika/XIII/kovacst.pdf.

The collapse of the short-lived Kun regime and the establishment of a counterrevolutionary regime brought with it new internment measures and judicial procedures and the use of criminal statutes to prosecute people for political reasons. In addition to the continued enforcement of the 1912 wartime emergency laws, a new decree was passed on August 19, 1919 that created new organs, “special councils” to accelerate the prosecution of people brought up on criminal charges for political reasons.[4] Thousands of people were “tried” and sentenced in the early months of the counterrevolution, and prisons were bursting at the seams until December 9, 1919, when new regulations abolished the councils and people arrested on baseless charges were released. In addition to the political weaponisation of criminal law, new internment regulations were also advanced in December 1919. These allowed the state to intern both aliens and Hungarian citizens who were classified as (1) “dangerous to public order and safety”; (2) suspected (*gyanús*) of being dangerous to public safety and order; and/or (3) “harmful” to the economic life of Hungary.[5]

Between internment and criminal processes, thousands of people spent time in camps, prisons, detention houses, and other formal and informal carceral spaces between August 1919 and 1924, (the year the last camp, Zalaegerszeg was closed down), but the high point of counterrevolutionary political incarceration was between 1919 and 1921. An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 persons were detained during this period, and it is likely that many more were jailed, even briefly, without any arrest record.[6] Across the country, local gaols and national military prisons were overflowing with people associated with either or both the Republic of Councils and Károlyi’s short-lived democratic government, as well as many Jews, many of whom were refugees or non-citizens from the former Habsburg territory of Galicia. Thousands more people with ties to the revolutions fled this rapidly expanding carceral state that some on the political left were now calling the “Hungarian Siberia” [Magyar Szibéria].[7]

Those incarcerated and interned during this period comprised a diverse group, which we can divide into three main categories. First, it included people who had directly participated in both the social democratic revolution and the Councils’ Republic (including those who were involved in activities related to elections). But by the late summer of 1919 when Entente armies and white militias were closing in on Budapest, many, though not all, in this group had fled to Austria, and from there travelled on to the Soviet Union, France, Germany, Switzerland, and even the U.S. as exiles. But this was not the only group targeted for legal and extra-legal retribution.

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[4] Ferenc Pölöskei, *Hungary after Two Revolutions,* translated by *Elizabeth* Csicseri-Rónay (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1980). See also: Béla Bodó, *The White Terror: Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921* (London: Routledge, 2019), esp. chapter 4.

[5] Dezső Nemes, *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez*, 2nd edition (Budapest: Szikra, 1956), 239.

[6] Number of people interned.

[7] This terminology was used by some activists on the left to describe the counterrevolutionary repressions of communists and social democrats. See, for example, case against Dezső Andorka, 1925, VII.5.c – 1925 – 8038, Bírósági-ügyészségi, Budapesti Fővárosi Levéltár (herafter referred to as BFL).

Second, because of the use of criminal law to address acts that had been legal under the previous regime, the line between "criminal" and "political" became very blurred, especially in the year and a half following the collapse of the Councils' Republic. For example, some people who were allocated housing or other property by the Kun regime were charged with theft or were accused of depriving people of their freedom when the original owners of that property submitted denunciations. Likewise, people who had served in official positions in the Károlyi or Kun governments, including those who simply maintained their pre-revolutionary post, might find themselves on trial for crimes like theft or incitement (such prosecutions were not, however, systematic). As I will explain below, the criminalisation of activities associated with the establishment and legitimisation of the Councils' Republic and its guiding ideology had distinctive gendered consequences for women incarcerated by the counterrevolutionary regime.

The third major group targeted were Jews, especially those who had arrived in Hungary as refugees during the war. Four years of war and economic collapse created fertile soil for the growth and intensification of anti-Jewish animus as accusations of profiteering and parasitism flourished across a wide swath of the population. The successive revolutions and impending territorial loss in Hungary, as well as widespread political instability in the lands of central and eastern Europe helped the alleged link between and revolutionary ideology crystallise into the Judaeo-Bolshevik mythology across the post-imperial space. This environment made all Jews, but especially non-citizen Jews living in Hungary, vulnerable to both criminal prosecution, internment, and expulsion under the legislation advanced in late 1919. Their very identity and recent history in the country marked them as potential political and economic threats to the country on the basis of their Jewish identity.[8]

In the past decade and a half, the scholarship on this long World War One period in east central Europe, including Hungary, has flowered.[9] Scholarship on the history of incarceration and internment over the course of the "long" war and its connections to the pre- and postwar periods in the region has seen similar growth.[10] The place of women and gender in east-central European histories of the war and (counter)revolutions, however, continues to be under-developed, with most work tending toward women's activities within the *formal* political sphere in the post-1918 era, though Pál Hatos's recent work on the 1919 revolution helps bring out important social historical dimensions to women's place and participation in the short-lived communist regime, notably with regard to marriage and family law.[11] My own research has focused on women's experiences of revolution and terror and the gendered dynamics of violence and women's experiences and narratives of violence, which has allowed me to make productive insights into how violence fitted into the post-1918 political culture of Hungary; women's involvement in the reconstruction of social relations after the war and revolution; and the place of gender in interpreting the fluidity of diplomacy and the nascent bipolarity between democratic capitalism and communism. This essay addresses some of these themes, focusing on the experiences

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[8] Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: The Belkap Press, 2018); Eliza Ablovatski, "The 1919 Central European Revolutions and the Judeo-Bolshevik Myth," *European Review of History/Revue Europeenne d'Histoire* 17, no. 3 (2010): 473–489.

[9] In addition to the contributions published in this book, what follows is a sampling some of the most recent scholarship to appear across the region: Jochen Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Bodó, *The White Terror;* Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2016); John Paul Newman, "Post-Imperial and Post-War Violence in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes 1917–1923," *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 3 (2010): 249–265; Gábor Egry, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika. Magyar kisebbségek nacionalizmus és regionalizmus között Csehszlovákiában és Romániában 1918–1944* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2015) (Egry is also the principal investigator for the ERC-funded project "Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions" or NEPOSTRANS); Thomas Chopard, "Ukrainian Neighbors. Pogroms and Exterminations in Ukraine, 1919–1920," *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 15

(2019); Jakub Beneš, "The Green Cadres and the Collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918," *Past & Present* 236, issue 1 (2017): 207–41; Ilse Josepha Lazaroms, "Marked by Violence: Hungarian Jewish Histories in the Wake of the White Terror, 1919–1922," *Zutot* 11 (2014): 38–49; Rudolf Kučera, *Rationed Life. Science, Everyday Life, and Working Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918* (Oxford; New York: Berghahn Books, 2016); Ota Konrád, "Two Post-war Paths: Popular Violence in the Bohemian Lands and in Austria in the Aftermath of World War I," *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 5 (2018): 759–775; *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War*, ed. Jochen Böhler, Wlodzimierz Borodziej, Joachim von Puttkamer (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014).

[10] Matthew Stibbe, "Gendered Experiences of Civilian Internment during the First World War: A Forgotten Dimension of Wartime Violence," in *Gender and Conflict since 1914: Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Gender and History*, ed. Ana Carden-Coyne (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 14–28; Matthew Stibbe, *Civilian Internment during the First World War: A European and Global History, 1914–1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); *Internment during the First World War: A Mass Global Phenomenon*, ed. Stefan Manz, Panikos Panayi, Matthew Stibbe (London: Routledge, 2018); Matthew Stibbe, "Civilian Internment and Civilian Internees in Europe, 1914–1920," *Immigrants & Minorities* 26, nos. 1–2 (2008): 49–81; Rebekah Klein-Pejšová, "Beyond the «Infamous Concentration Camps of the Old Monarchy»: Jewish Refugee Policy from Wartime Austria-Hungary to Interwar Czechoslovakia," *Austrian History Yearbook* (2014): 150–166; Kovács, *Az internálás mint rendészeti válasz állambiztonsági és államrendészeti kihivásokra 1919–1945 között.*

[11] Judith Szapor, *Hungarian Women's Activism in the Wake of the First World War: From Rights to Revanche* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Ingrid Sharp, Matthew Stibbe, *Women Activists Between War and Peace: Europe, 1918–1923* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2006); Nancy Wingfield, *The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Eliza Ablovatski "«Cleansing the Red Nest»: Revolution and White Terror in Munich and Budapest, 1919" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2005); Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See: Pál Hatos, *Rósszfiúk világforradalma. Az 1919-es Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság története* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2021), especially chapter 11.

of women who were committed communists or socialists, did not or could not flee or emigrate in the immediate aftermath of the Kun regime's collapse, and who were prosecuted for their actions between 1918–20, a group that has been underrepresented in scholarship on the pre-World War 2 era. Unlike many of those who rejected the political labels affixed to them by the counterrevolutionary regime, this group of political women considered themselves (and were considered by many of those on the political left) to be political prisoners but were being treated like criminals under the law and in their material and physical experiences of incarceration.[12]

Political imprisonment has its own history, and prisons or camps, like any institution, have their own hierarchies that reflect both those of the world "outside" and the population "inside," most notably between the "criminal" and "political" prisoner. But if there is one thing that might bring these two categories of prisoner together it is that both have generally been gendered as masculine, and the prison as a masculine and perhaps masculinising space.[13] Similarly, until recent decades, the history and historiography of communism and labour movements advance the highly gendered figure of the male worker as the ultimate hero and the embodied symbol of the workers' movement or the state.[14] This is not to say that women have had no role to play politically, economically, or culturally, but those roles have tended to be circumscribed and gendered in distinctively feminine ways, though the emancipation of women (especially sexual liberation) has often been one of the most maligned dimensions of socialist revolutions, including conservative and counterrevolutionary elements in Hungary.

The discussion of all of these issues is much deeper and expansive and deserves much more attention than is possible in a short essay such as this. But in turning to the experiences of one woman, Gizella Berzeviczy, my hope is to come to a better understanding how "political" (left-wing) women navigated the turns of Hungary's and eastern Europe's twentieth century and their place in the telling of that specific chapter of history.

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[12] Sándor Lestyan, "Mi történik a budapesti fogházban?" *A Világ* (October 17, 1919).

[13] Padraic Kenney, *Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), see chapter 3. Anna Müller, *If the Walls Could Talk: Inside a Woman's Prison in Communist Poland* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), introduction, esp. 16–18.

[14] There is a growing body of scholarship on women and gender in the national and international communist and labour movement and feminism. See, for example, Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in the Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 547–573; Veronika Helfert, *Frauen, wacht auf! Eine Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte von Revolution und Rätebewegung in Österreich, 1916–1924* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2021); Susan Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik und Männergewerkschaft: Internationale Geschlechterpolitik, IGB-Gewerkschafterinnen und die Arbeiter- und Frauenbewegungen der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2021).

"FREE ME FROM THE TRAP THEY HAVE SET FOR ME"[15]

The words above come from inscription over the door at the Márianosztra penitentiary, the name of the institution after which Berzeviczy entitled her memoir. The words themselves come from the book of Psalms in the Bible, betraying the history of the building as a cloister-turned-prison. The yellow walls Berzeviczy described in her description at the beginning of this essay also evoke the Habsburg origins of the prison, which was founded following another failed Hungarian Revolution in 1848, when the building was transformed into a carceral space for women attended to by Sisters of Mercy from the order of Saint Vincent de Paul. In some ways, the carceral experience for Berzeviczy was distinct, especially, perhaps, because of the meaning she assigned it. But in other ways, her description spoke to the experiences of many imprisoned in the early months and years of the counterrevolution, which were in turn shaped by class, gender, and ethnic hierarchies, as well as citizenship status. The following discussion narrows on Berzeviczy's carceral experiences as recounted in her memoir, while also exploring how it fits within the broader context of counterrevolutionary incarceration.

Berzeviczy's imprisonment was the result of her involvement in the Republic of Councils, and specifically through her work as the headteacher of a woman's school in Budapest. Her teaching experience prior to 1919 had been in towns and cities in the Hungarian provinces (Arad, Trencsén/Trenčín, Budafok, Szabadka/Subotica), a trajectory that was shared by other female communist activists involved in "educating the masses" in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.[16] However, she returned to Budapest in 1919 and was appointed the headteacher of what was one of Budapest's oldest and most prestigious schools—an institution where future primary school teachers were trained.

Educators in general and female educators specifically were a fairly visible group of defendants in the prosecutions that took place following the communist government's collapse, which speaks to the importance of education in the revolutionary agenda of the Kun government and for the subsequent counterrevolutionary regime.[17] Moreover, some teachers, notably primary school teachers outside Budapest, were supporters of the new regime.[18] Kun announced, "The schools from now on will become, through the efforts of the teachers, the most important institution for the training of socialism."[19] A rash of new initiatives were set in motion in schools including kindergartens. Education was to be secularised, coeducational schools were created, and the curriculum was overhauled based on socialist principles, including women's and sexual emancipation. On the one hand, evaluating this revolution in education is difficult: the school year was nearly over when the revolutionary government took the reins of power, and in many cases, schools were already closed; there was also an urgent teacher shortage coupled with shortages of all sorts of other things including paper. On the other, it is important to take the Council government's emphasis on education seriously as a, if not *the* primary means of birthing a new society, which made teachers extraordinarily important for the radical revolution and thus extremely vulnerable in the radical counterrevolutionary phase.[20]

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[15] Psalm 31:5 in the English-language, King James Version of the Bible.

[16] See, for example, the forthcoming chapter by Isidora Grubački, "Women Activists' Relationship to Peasant Women's Work in Yugoslavia in the 1930s," in *Women, Work, and Activism*, ed. Eloisa Betti, Leda Papastefanaki, Marica Tolomelli, Susan Zimmermann (Budapest: CEU Press, forthcoming, 2022).

[17] Leslie Waters, "Learning and Unlearning Nationality: Hungarian education in re-annexed Felvidék, 1938–1944," *Hungarian Historical Review* 2, no. 3 (2013): 538–565.

[18] Hatos, *Rósszfiúk világforradalma*, for example 275.

[19] Frank Eckelt, "Internal Policies of the Hungarian Soviet Republic," in *Hungary in Revolution: Nine Essays*, ed. Iván Völgyes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 61–68.

Berzeviczy was specifically charged with incitement and (anti-Catholic) blasphemy, charges similar to those levelled against most of the teachers and pedagogues prosecuted in Budapest at the time.[21] However, her memoir of this tumultuous period says very little about her work prior to the collapse of the Kun regime. Instead, Berzeviczy focused her memoir on the approximately two years she spent in prison during the counterrevolution and White Terror rather than her political activism and work prior to the war. In fact, *Márianosztra* begins on August 1, 1919.

In the months following the collapse of the Kun regime, civilian and military prisons and jails across Hungary were filled to overflowing, and frequently prisoners were shunted around to multiple institutions, which made it difficult for family members to maintain contact with and provide food and linen to their incarcerated loved ones. Berzeviczy's journey through Hungary's "world of prisons" included stops in police custody, three transit or auxiliary prisons, before finally landing in the Márianosztra prison located in the same-named village near the present-day border between Hungary and Slovakia. According to Lajos Magyar, a communist journalist who, like Berzeviczy, was jailed and then went to the Soviet Union as part of the 1922 prison exchange, ninety women communists were locked up with 700 to 800 criminals including thieves, murderers, and prostitutes at Márianosztra.[22] It is difficult to get a sense of just how "full" the prison was during her sentence, in part because despite the massive increase of incarcerated persons, Márianosztra remained a prison for women only, and it seems that the physical conditions were relatively better there than in the other places she was jailed in terms of cleanliness and discipline.[23]

Treatment and conditions varied greatly depending on the type of institution in which people were held—and depending on who served as guards. As Béla Bodó and I have shown elsewhere, in institutions guarded by the military or militias, treatment was far harsher—physically and mentally—than in civilian prisons, which had been the subject of reform attempts prior to the war and especially during the Hungarian Republic of Councils. Officers' battalions were known to torture prisoners and commit sexual and sexualised violence against men and women.[24] Facilities were often sweltering in the summer and freezing and damp in the winter. Medical care was often difficult to obtain in camps and prisons, even for things like childbirth, and prisoners were generally dependent on their relatives, frequently women, for adequate food and clothing, and guards sometimes refused to allow visitors.[25] Epidemic diseases spread in carceral institutions, including Márianosztra, sparing neither prisoners nor the nuns.[26]

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[20] Ablovatski, *Cleansing the Red Nest*, chapter 3, esp. 156–159.

[21] Budapesti Fővárosi Levéltár, Büntetőügyek, Budapesti Királyi Büntetőtörvényszék iratai, HU BFL – VII.5.c – 1566 – 1920, case against Gizella Berzeviczy on the charge of incitement of class hatred and blasphemy. A short discussion of Berzeviczy's trial appears in Ablovatski, *Cleansing the Red Nest*, 156–159.

[22] Lajos Magyar, "Az Irgalom Nővérei, 1920," in *Magyar Pokol: A Magyarországi fehérterror betiltott és üldözött kiadványok tükrében* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1964), 261.

[23] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 150.

Márianosztra had been a prison but in the context of counterrevolutionary Hungary, it was a place where the secular worldview of communism and the "sacred" Christian national outlook collided: it was "the home of prisoners and nuns; communist prisoners and the Sisters of Mercy from the Order of St. Vincent de Paul under one roof."[27] Berzeviczy proudly claimed the identity of political prisoner in her memoir, and her description of her time in Márianosztra indicates that "politicals" (the communists) were often treated differently by the nuns.[28] She recorded that the communist prisoners were treated harshly and watched more closely.[29] Like many political prisoners across time and space, she also consistently mentions when the communist prisoners were mixed with the criminal population. This is a common complaint made by political prisoners, but one that had different implications for women prisoners in places like Hungary, many of whom feared being associated with women brought in on criminal charges because many were suspected of prostitution and were assumed to be carriers of venereal disease, which meant they were subject to compulsory (and painful) gynaecological exams.[30] Although Berzeviczy's memoir is more sympathetic than other sources about the "criminal" women with whom she was imprisoned, it also betrays her frustration with them for their compliance with the prison regime.

According to Berzeviczy, psychological cruelty was also an important dimension of the prison experience for the communist women at Márianosztra, who faced marginalisation and isolation to “soften” them.[31] The women political prisoners experienced long periods of solitary confinement and were prevented from going outside, which she said exacerbated health issues that spread throughout the prison. The nuns’ verbal abuse of the communist prisoners also seems to have been commonplace, as was vigorous preaching.[32] Berzeviczy even recounted an incident when some communist women were put on display for a visiting group from a girls’ school who giggled at the women who were harangued and threatened by the nuns.[33]

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[24] Emily R. Gioielli, "«White Misrule»: Terror and Political Violence during Hungary's Long World War I," (PhD dissertation, Central European University, 2015), chpt. 4; Bodó, *The White Terror*, chpt. 4.

[25] Györgyné Bölöni, "Vergődő éjszakák, 1921," in *Magyar Pokol: A Magyarországi fehérterror betiltott és üldözött kiadványok tükrében* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1964), 125.

[26] For example, Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 245–249.

[27] Magyar, *Az Irgalom Nővérei, 1920*, 262.

[28] A frequent grievance or concern of political prisoners is a lack of differentiation with criminals, and in counterrevolutionary Hungary, this was no different. However, Berzeviczy's memoir runs against the grain in this regard, though her memoir also reflects resentment at being held with "thieves, cheats, and prostitutes" as Lajos Magyar described, even if she and other communist women prisoners received different treatment. See: Kenney, *Dance in Chains*, chpt. 1.

[29] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 169, 190.

[30] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, e.g., 150, 242.

While she had hoped to maintain her activism even while she was incarcerated, the nuns at Márianosztra did not allow her pen or paper. When an article appeared in the *Becsi Magyar Ujsag*, a newspaper published by Hungarians in exile in Vienna, about conditions in the prison, the prison administration was shocked and questioned the communist prisoners, who responded credulously to the nuns’ demands for information about the origins of the publication.[34] Berzeviczy described attempts to educate fellow prisoners despite the limitations placed on the communists and did not back away from her and her fellow political prisoners’ belief in a better world for working women, though her memoir sometimes reproduces ideas about women’s ability to manipulate and to be manipulated—through both her depictions of the female prisoner population and the nuns.

One of the threads running through Berzeviczy’s description of her time in Márianosztra was the conflict between the different “spiritual” commitments of the two groups of women at the centre of her narrative: the communist women and the Catholic nuns-cum-prison guards. This in itself was not unusual within the radical left milieu in which Berzeviczy had been a part, as anticlericalism was an important dimension of communist ideology and for a brief time in Hungary, official government policy.[35] Furthermore, education was an arena in which the power of the church was keenly felt, and Berzeviczy’s professional perspective also contributed to and shaped her antipathy toward religious institutions and their role in (Hungarian) society. It is important to acknowledge this dimension of Berzeviczy’s perspective, which was shaded by her ideology but also by her disgust for her captors, which appears in her frequent sarcastic mentions of “mercy”—or its lack among the nuns at Márianosztra. But her memoir also reveals the ways that spiritual manipulation and abuse were used by the Sisters of Mercy against the women prisoners under their control. According to the nuns, God was angry with the communists for being so horrible; they dismissed the sense of justice that motivated the political prisoners in their work and declared that the communist women took advantage of the stupidity of women and girls.[36] (This was a charge Berzeviczy rejected also in gendered terms, by instead portraying female prisoners who accepted the nuns' treatment as a means to secure preferential treatment and not due to their genuine devotion). That a Christian order would have spiritual goals for those under their control is not surprising, but it seems that for many of the nuns at Márianosztra, committed communist souls were almost impossible to save.

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[31] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 190–191.

[32] Descriptions appear throughout the section on Márianosztra in Berzeviczy’s memoir.

[33] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 183.

[34] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 264.

[35] Given the “Christian National” course adopted by the Hungarian state in the interwar period, starting with the counterrevolution, it was common for people on the left, especially those living in exile to point out the hypocrisy and grotesque violence perpetrated by those associated with the counterrevolutionary and then Horthy regime under the banner of Christianity or the “Christian National Course.” *Magyar Pokol* contains several examples of this perspective.

HOW DOES "A NAIVE REVOLUTIONARY OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA BECOME A COMMUNIST WARRIOR?": BERZEVICZY IN POST-1948 HUNGARY

If the suppression of the history of the Republic of Councils defined Hungarian political culture during the two and a half decades that followed, integrating it into the post-1948 People's Democracy proved no easier for Hungary's new communist leaders. The Councils Republic's failures, coupled with the fate of some of its leaders—e.g., Béla Kun was killed during the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union—made it difficult to incorporate into a "usable past." Instead, as Péter Apor has argued, in the pre-1956 years, the Councils' Republic was conceptualised as the "prelude of the postwar Communist regime, rather than its origin."[37] Furthermore, relatively little was published on the period, at least in terms of official histories, and canonisation in the workers Pantheon in Budapest's most prominent cemetery would not come until 1959.

Yet, the post-World War One revolutions and counterrevolution were not simply part of a complex national history that many would prefer to forget. For people like Gizella Berzeviczy, these events were integral to their life stories and trajectories, and they hoped to find meaning in them that could be transferred to a new generation of Hungarians who had a second chance to build a revolutionary society. In the forward to *Márianosztra*, Berzeviczy described how she came to write the memoir, explaining that she had intended to become the "chronicler of our [Hungary's] prisons," but that constant punishment for "insubordination" and solitary confinement had prevented her from writing at the time, so she wrote from memory once she reached the Soviet Union, first publishing about her experiences in Márianosztra, and later finishing other parts of the book. Because of the challenges of writing, she seemed to have come to see the book as an unvarnished collection of reports about her experiences that included all the "petty quarrels and glaring discomforts experienced because of the interdependence of prison life." She reminded readers that revolution not only brought out the best, but some of the worst impulses of people; after all, it wasn't heroes but "people who made revolution."[38] Reading these words a century later, it seems useful to read them as a fairly revealing comment on her past in both Hungary and the Soviet Union and the failures and violent excesses that accompanied revolutionary transformation. But this rejection of heroic narrative could also be read as a rejection of the heroic biographies that had enormous cultural influence in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s and Berzeviczy's unwillingness to fully internalise this ethos (albeit against the background of a published prison memoir).

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[36] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 161.

[37] Péter Apor, *Fabricating Authenticity in Soviet Hungary: The Afterlife of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in the Age of State Socialism* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 14.

[38] Berzeviczy, *Márianosztra*, 7.

This poignant reminder about the utter humanness—with all its failures and foibles—of revolutionary transformation is also helpful when considering her legacy during the state socialist period in Hungary, and especially during the Stalinist years. Many revolutionary regimes face the challenge of constructing new societies, and new men and women, and yet they still have to contend with the hierarchies, structures, and values that defined the "old regime." Women's roles in society were one of the key arenas in which the clash between the old and new played out, and her legacy reflects the contradictions that stem from the liminality of an unfinished revolution as well as narratives of the failed revolution that had emerged immediately in the wake of the Kun government's collapse—including negative stories of the incompetence and perversion of revolutionary education during the 1919 "Commune".[39] Furthermore, the scholarship on political women in the early Stalinist period has largely focused on the younger generation of activists who were not involved in the events of 1919 and had been involved in underground activism, which makes sense given the ages and life (and spatial) trajectories of the older generation.[40]

As other scholars have shown, when it came to the creation of "new women," actual existing state socialist societies struggled to fulfil the promises of equality, or often de-prioritised the distinct needs of women and the goal of gender equality in favour of economic/industrial mobilisation.[41] Policies seeking to reshape the lives, experiences, and opportunities of women in state socialist societies were often full of ambiguities, false starts, course changes, and inequalities, as were the messages that women received about their roles and function in society. This dynamic is evident in the reception of Gizella Berzeviczy's books and the reaction to her death in 1954, revealing the challenge of integrating a female "old fighter" (*régi harcos*) coming back from twenty-three years of exile in the Soviet Union into the new socialist Hungary.[42]

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[39] Péter Csunderlik, *A "Vörös Farsangtól" a Vörös Tatárjárásig: A Tanácsköztársaság a korai Horthy-korszak pamflet- és visszaemléke zés -irodalmában* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2019), 207–217.

[40] Andrea Pető, *Women in Hungarian Politics, 1945–1951* (New York: East European Monographs, 2003), especially chapter 9.

[41] Susan Zimmermann, "Gender Regime and Gender Struggle in Hungarian State Socialism," *Aspasia* 4 (2010): 2–3; Maria Bucur, "Women and State Socialism: Failed Promises and Radical Changes Revisited," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 6 (2016): 847–855; Agnieszka Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*, transl. Marta Rozmysłowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021); Krassimira Daskalova, "How Should We Name the «Women--Friendly» Actions of State Socialism?" *Aspasia* (2008): 214–219.

[42] "Eltemették Berzeviczy Gizella," *Népszava* (January 15, 1954).

In a review of *Márianosztra* published in *Magyarnyelvőr*, Lajos Vincze recounts Berzeviczy's experiences as an unjustly treated communist during the counterrevolution. Being pursued by prosecutors because of her commitment to teach the "people" did not prevent her from homelessness and denunciation. But prison, according to Vincze, did not shake her commitment to the "development and revolution" in Hungary.[43] Vincze also wrote that Berzeviczy's "high-ranking ancient noble" heritage also did not prevent her from receiving an eight-year prison sentence, which highlighted Berzeviczy's self-sacrifice for the greater good as well as the disruption of old social hierarchies her prosecution represented. This framing is interesting in that it is unclear as to whether the author approves or disapproves of her inability to use her social status to escape prosecution. In the paragraphs that followed, Vincze also recounted that Berzeviczy's daughter and she were welcomed into the arms of the Soviet Union, evoking Berzeviczy's role as a mother. He ended the review by praising Berzeviczy's writing, especially because "the Hungarian teacher preserved her Hungarianness and flawless Hungarian language even as she was driven out of her homeland and found a new one in the Soviet Union."

This particular review was printed in a publication dedicated to the Hungarian language, so a brief meditation on the "flawless Hungarian" should be read through this lens. But the framing of her as a mother and a teacher and the praise for her preservation of her Hungarianness also mobilised older gender discourses in Hungary about the roles of women in society that had become especially strong in the interwar period: to teach their children to be Hungarians.[44] Berzeviczy is presented as ideologically committed to communism and a victim of political persecution, but this political ferocity is channelled through her roles as pedagogue and patriot.

The tension between the political and feminine in discussions of Berzeviczy was not universal. For example, another review of *Márianosztra* placed its focus on Berzeviczy as a political prisoner and her portrait of class and political struggle in Márianosztra that took place "under the surface" (the reviewer quoted this line from her memoir).[45] However, the review also mentioned some of the sexualised humiliations she and other communist women faced at the hands of the Sisters of Mercy in Márianosztra. Thirty years after her prosecution and incarceration and despite her unquestioned commitment to the workers' movement, the author of the review, Pál Nagy, still found it worthwhile to recount titillating images of naked female prisoners bathing in front of each other for his readers.

Book reviews of *Márianosztra* implicitly held up Berzeviczy as an example of a committed communist who worked tirelessly for the creation of the now-existing socialist state as a communist pedagogue and activist even while in exile in the Soviet Union. But the obituary published in *Nők Lapja* [Woman's

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[43] Lajos Vincze, "Review of Márianosztra," *Magyarnyelvőr*, vol. 72 (Budapest: Szikra, 1948), 282.

[44] Ablovatski, *Cleansing the Red Nest*; Szapor, *Hungarian Women's Activism*, conclusion. There is more work to be done on this theme with regard to the interwar period.

[45] Pál Nagy, "*Márianosztra*: Berzeviczy Gizella könvye," *Útunk* 12 (1949): 14.

Magazine], the magazine affiliated with the women's organisation of the communist party, was different.[46] It explicitly called for readers to see Berzeviczy as a "role model."[47] It went on to describe her life and education, recounting her dedication to education and her speech in the courtroom when, after she confirmed the charges against her, told the court that it was necessary to "revolutionise hearts and heads" and "work in the service of communist education."[48]

The obituary recalled that she remained calm, which made the judge presiding over the trial lose his temper as he yelled at her for her making "communist speeches" in his courtroom. The article also recounted her cleverness for asking that her fine be changed to an additional hundred days in prison so as to bring no immediate satisfaction to anyone involved in her prosecution. It went on to describe her educational activities in the Soviet Union, including in POW camps, and finished with her return to her "homeland", where she continued to give lectures on education, and "worked tirelessly in the library of the MDP [Hungarian Workers' Party], even in her advanced age, up until the day she died."[49]

Like the reviews of her book, this obituary reflects ambiguities about women's roles in state socialist Hungary. Berzeviczy was portrayed as a committed communist but also a Hungarian patriot who sought revolution out of her love for her homeland, though to be clear this explicit patriotic language was not used in the essay. She is noted for her grace under pressure, her cleverness, her principled nature, her willingness to suffer for her ideological convictions, and her tireless work on behalf of education. A 1966 column commemorative column about Berzeviczy in *Asszonyok*, the Hungarian-language version of the Soviet woman's magazine, gave a similarly dramatic biography of Berzeviczy, written by Magda Aranyossi, who had worked with Berzeviczy in the Teachers Union during the Councils' Republic. Berzeviczy was courageous and uncompromising in her commitment to communism and to the education of women.[50] When viewed in a wider lens, this obituary, along with other discussions of Berzeviczy in the post-1948 press, mirrors the "heroic" biographical patterns that emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, whereby a person was presented as "admirable, desirable, and enviable, as something to strive for. . . ."—in the case of *Nők Lapja,* explicitly.[51] But they also evince more traditional gendered nationalist narratives about sacrifice and women's roles in preserving and transmitting national values to the next generation, portraying a (noble)woman who had status and wealth but instead chose to eschew it for the sake of revolution and the nation.

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[46] The magazine was the press organ of the *Magyar Nők Demokratikus Szövetsége* [Democratic Alliance of Hungarian Women, MNDSZ,], which existed between 1945–1956.

[47] "Berzeviczy Gizella, 1878–1954," *Nők Lapja* 2 (1954).

[48] *Berzeviczy Gizella, 1878–1954.*

[49] *Berzeviczy Gizella, 1878–1954.*

[50] Magda Aranyossi, "Berzeviczy Gizella, 1878–1954," *Asszonyok* 6 (1966): 8. *Aszzonyok* ran short biographies of important early communist and leftist women including Erzsébet Pálinkás, who knew Berzeviczy, was imprisoned in Márianosztra, and went to the Soviet Union in a prisoner exchange in 1922, where she died in 1942.

[51] Anna Krylova, "In Their Own Words? Soviet Women Writers and the Search for Self," in *A History of Women's Writing in Russia*, ed. Adele Marie Barker, Jehanne M. Gheith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 246. See also: Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Berzeviczy's life and legacy reflect the radical twists and turns of Hungarian history, the "fool" (or perhaps "stooge") of one regime, and the hero of another.[52] Her experiences also exemplify the promises of, fears about, and challenges for women's emancipation and women's suffering. Berzeviczy was made an example of by both the counterrevolutionary regime and the post-World War Two socialist regime, albeit after her trial and the prisoner exchange in the early 1920s, Berzeviczy seems to have faded from view until her return after the Second World War. According to her account of her time with the Sisters of Mercy at Márianosztra, she and her fellow political prisoners were considered to be intractable women whose souls were lost, minds were weak, and morals were loose and thus had to be marginalised or maligned. In short, she was an example of the path women should *avoid*.

For the socialist regime (both during and after the Stalinist period), Berzeviczy was a committed activist dedicated to the liberation of Hungary and the world. She was a symbol of possibility as well as hard work and sacrifice. She also came to be remembered for her defiant and principled stance against the prosecuting judge (at her trial), her commitment to the working classes and world liberation, even in the midst of the catastrophe of the Second World War.

On the one hand, Berzeviczy had an extraordinary life and a set of experiences that differed significantly from that of many Hungarian women at that time. She was an educated, committed communist activist from a prominent family, and a political prisoner in counterrevolutionary Hungary prior to her exile in the Soviet Union. There were others like her (and with her) in the Márianosztra penitentiary, but many people had fled fearing her fate or worse, and female political prisoners were in the minority among political prisoners as a group and among all female prisoners. Fewer still wrote in depth about their experiences in prison. This relatively unique experience coupled with her time in the Soviet Union gave her a place among revolutionary heroes who had spent their lives working to build communism in exile or in the underground movement.

On the other hand, her obituary and commemorations repeatedly returned to her work in education, which was one of the arenas most accessible to politically active women both during the 1919 Republic of Councils and in Stalinist Hungary. Furthermore, depictions of her life revealed the heavy expectations on women to be simultaneously maternal, patriotic, and revolutionary, while at the same time reflected the still-limited arenas of activity women could participate in, namely those like education which had been historically feminised. If they were not able to identify with her as a political exile or prisoner, Hungarian women could have found common ground with Berzeviczy on this point.

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[52] "Törvényszéki csarnok," *Budapesti Hírlap* (March 13, 1920).

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