

The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture, and the State in Early Socialist Hungary

Introduction

In November 1951, on a night shift in pit number XII of the Tatabánya coal trust, Sándor Hajósi, one of the most experienced coal hewers, worked at a poor position at the coalface and was unable to make his quota. As the hopelessness of his task dawned on him, he became demoralised, slackening his work pace and growing increasingly angry. Finally, he threw down his pick in frustration. He confronted the deputy responsible for his section, arguing that as a ‘good worker’ with experience he deserved a better work area in which he would easily be able to fulfil his quota. His superior retorted that he should not argue, and should return to work. Rather than standing in solidarity with him, Hajósi’s workmates were far from united as to whether his treatment had been just. One coal hewer new to the mine, Lajos Szabó, was heard to remark, reiterating the view of the deputy, that had Hajósi not put down his tools and argued, he would have been able to fill two carts in the time he had wasted.¹

The incident was reported in the newspaper of the party organisation that covered the coal trust. Party officials, under pressure from their superiors in Budapest, were anxious to exhort ordinary miners to maintain work discipline even as management lost effective control of production.² Although party-propagandists were eager to use tensions within the workforce for their own ends, such conflicts were not merely products of their wishful thinking. The more experienced miners regarded newcomers recruited in early 1951 as inferior to them. Such attitudes were related to conflicts between workers based on notions of skill and hierarchy that came to the fore when the regime put recruits to work after crash training courses created to replace traditional apprenticeships. Few of the experienced miners expressed their opposition to

* First published in Mark Pittaway 2002, ‘The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture, and the State in Early Socialist Hungary’, *Journal of Modern History*, 74, 4: 737–69.

1 ‘Azt hallotuk . . .’, *Harc a Szénerért*, 29 November 1951, p. 4.

2 For more on the actual conditions of production in the coal mines during late 1951, see Pittaway 1998, pp. 110–49.

these changes publicly. There were exceptions though: in a meeting in pit number VI, one miner stated that he did not regard it as just ‘that somebody could become a coal hewer after only one year’. Instead, he argued that ‘a miner should only be able to join a brigade after a good six to eight years’ apprenticeship under a master’.³ The state was aware of widespread conflict over skill at Hungarian coalfaces. In 1953, one policy-maker writing in the party’s theoretical journal criticised more experienced coal miners for their ‘skill-based chauvinism, the way they look down on new workers who have come straight from the village and on female workers’.⁴

The disputes over skill and hierarchy in Hungary’s coal mines during the early 1950s shed light on the conflicts over working-class identity that were generated by the state’s programme of industrial transformation. This programme formed one plank of the drive to reshape Hungarian society along socialist lines that was initiated by the Stalinist dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁵ We know very little about the reactions of society as a whole to this programme of transformation. This is because the bulk of recent research on the Rákosi era has focused on the destruction of civil society at the beginnings of the dictatorship, the show trials, and the mechanisms of repression employed by the state. Much of this work has reified state power, arguing that the Stalinist dictatorship was effectively able to strip society of its autonomy. Social groups, private business, religion and independent associations have often been seen as passive victims of socialist despotism.⁶

That Rákosi’s dictatorship, like its Stalinist counterparts across Eastern Europe, was despotic is beyond doubt. It is undeniable that it employed considerable repression in the pursuit of its policies. It is also clear that it initiated radical social change that was bitterly opposed by many of those affected. Agricultural cooperatives were created; peasants were subjected to extraordinary taxation, coercion and police supervision; private industry was decimated

3 Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Levéltár (Komárom-Esztergom County Archive, hereafter KEML), *Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Komárom Megyei Bizottság Archivium iratai* (Papers of the Archive of the Komárom County Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, hereafter MSZMP KMBA ir.) 32f.4/150.e, p. 26.

4 Kürti 1953, pp. 1024–5.

5 For an introduction to the social history of post-war Hungary, see Valuch 2001. The best recent general overview of the Stalinist years is provided in Romsics 1999, pp. 333–82. See also Gyarmati, Botos, Zinner and Korom 1988.

6 For a sample of this literature, in both English and Hungarian, see Hankiss 1990; Szakács and Zinner 1997; Standeisky, Kozák, Pataki and Rainer (eds.) 1998; Róna-Tas 1997; Belényi and Varga 2000, pp. 13–52; and Szakács 1998, pp. 257–98.