

“Non-significant” Historical Figures and the Corrective Function of Biography

Ákos BARTHA

In this study, I aim to present some of the methodological experiences I gained by researching the life of Kálmán Zsabka (1897–1971), Iván Szűts (1900–1973), and Kálmán Rátz (1888–1951). To start, I consider that the corrective function of biography can apply equally to the history concerning “famous historical figures” and to the stories of unknown or less-known historical agents who are stuck outside the canon. By exploring “non-significant” historical figures and exceptional normal cases, we can increase our knowledge not only of the individuals we study, but also of their environment. Thus, by fitting small (biographical) stories into the big picture, we can make a small difference in the latter.

Keywords: biography, corrective function of biography, methodology, non-significant figures, Hungary

Ákos Bartha is a researcher at Eötvös Loránd University Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History.

Bartha.Akos@abtk.hu | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8812-1541>

© 2025 Ákos Bartha

DOI: 10.14712/24645370.4997



This text is available under Diamond Open Access and the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (BY-NC) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

One of the most influential biographers of our time, Nigel Hamilton, wrote that his original aim was to “rethink, re-explore, and, where warranted, correct the way we, in current times, see certain historical figures. Not only the person as personality, in other words, but the historical context and – equally open to debate – the subject’s historical importance in our understanding of the past, and even the present.”¹ Since biographies are written primarily about famous people, it is no surprise that Hamilton has written books, inter alia, about famous writers, American presidents,

¹ NIGEL HAMILTON, *Biography as corrective*, in: The Biographical Turn. Lives in History, (edd.) Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, Jonne Harmsma, London 2017, p. 24.

and a legendary general (Bernard Montgomery). The traditional political history-centricity of the historian's profession means that biographies are mainly written about the so-called "significant" historical figures. Like the Hungarian case,² contemporary Czech biography is also dominated by a kind of "judgmental complex," in which the biographer's task is to reassess the place in the canon of an already-canonised personality, or to demystify him in the name of historical truth.³ This is usually done without any theoretical or methodological reflection.⁴

Following the tradition of re-canonisation as outlined above, I embarked on writing my first biography, which focuses on a well-known, 20th-century Hungarian politician. Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky is considered a national hero in Hungary, who went from being a leading politician of the Hungarian far-right to a leader of the Hungarian anti-Nazi resistance in 1944 and later to an executed martyr. In my monograph, which also deals with the intellectual legacy of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, I broke with earlier literature, which assumed a kind of "left-wing turn" in his career, and instead focused on the continuities of his worldview.⁵

There is, however, another tradition that goes back several decades, thanks to the explosion of biographical research since the 1980s (*biographical turn*). The disillusionment with the study of large structures (e.g. social classes), and the rehabilitation and reemergence of *historical agency*, was not only fuelled by such postmodern epistemological doubts, but also by a more trivial need in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain, to finally understand what had happened to or-

² GYÖRGY KÖVÉR, *Biográfia és társadalomtörténet*, Budapest 2014, p. 18. With Hungarian examples: FABIÁN MÁTÉ, *A huszadik századi magyar életrajzírás néhány historiográfiai és módszertani kérdése. Adalékok egy készülő életrajzhoz*, in: Tanulmányok Dr. Misóczki Lajos 80. születésnapjára, (ed.) László Kiss, Eger 2018, pp. 83–99.

³ VÁCLAV SIXTA, *Možnosti historické biografie. Teorie biografie a historická věda*, Prague 2023, p. 221.

⁴ JANA WOHLMUTH MARKUPOVÁ, *Between 'Creators and Bearers of the Czech National Myth' and an 'Academic Suicide': Czech Biography in the Twenty-First Century*, in: Different Lives. Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden 2020, p. 193.

⁵ ÁKOS BARTHA, *Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre. Életút és utóélet*, Budapest 2019. In English, briefly: ÁKOS BARTHA, *From Myths to Reality: the Regionalism of Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky (1886–1944)*, Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society 170/2017, pp. 139–149.

dinary people in the decades since.⁶ This framework of interpretation, which derives from microhistory, denies that biography is necessarily the privilege of "great men," and, at the same time, draws attention to the fact that the corrective function of biography, mentioned by Hamilton, can be just as valid in the research of "non-significant" historical figures who are not considered important. Even – or even then – when these historical agents appear to be individual outliers.⁷

Indeed, historical agents who are not making "big" history are primarily interesting because their life experiences can correct or extend our knowledge of their surroundings ("the historical context").⁸ Thus, the inclusion of small stories in the big picture can also make a small difference to the big picture.⁹ This is often achieved through the discovery of an "exceptionally normal" phenomenon. Such marginal cases can reveal hidden realities which, for one reason or another, were hidden from posterity.¹⁰ The concept of the "exceptional normal" refers to the analytical emphasis on how unexpected or unusual phenomena – as well as unmediated or unconsciously transmitted information – can reveal insights that significantly enhance our understanding of broader historical

⁶ Among the theories that go beyond deterministic (e.g. positivist, Marxist) models of social description, it is worth referring to Barry Barnes' concept of "responsible action," which works against predictability, and Miguel Angel Cabrera's approach, which discusses agency as a modern state of consciousness and identity construction. BARRY BARNES, *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action*, London 2000. MIGUEL ANGEL CABRERA, *Post Social History*, Oxford 2004.

⁷ "[...] lives which deviate from the average seem to offer a better way of thinking about the balance between the specificity of personal destiny and the society as a whole. Variety is more significant than typicality. Only a multitude of experiences makes it possible to address two fundamental aspects of history: conflicts and possibilities." SABINA LORIGA, *The plurality of the past: Historical time and the rediscovery of biography*, in: *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, (edd.) Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, Jonne Harmsma, London–New York, 2017, p. 38.

⁸ HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN, *The Representativeness of a Reputation: A 'Third Wave' in Microhistory*, in: *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden–Boston 2021, pp. 192–193.

⁹ HANS RENDERS, *The Deep-Rooted Fear of Theory among Biographers*, in: *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden–Boston 2021, p. 22.

¹⁰ ISTVÁN M. SZIJÁRTÓ, *A történezmikroszkópja. A mikrotörténelem elmélete és gyakorlata*, Budapest 2014, p. 53.

contexts.¹¹ It can be, for example, a medical practice “which could be considered questionable by the standards of the period,”¹² or a forgotten cultural transfer, whereby an avant-garde community, usually seen as marginalised, is seen as a normative group.¹³ Below are three examples for the corrective function of biography in the case of “non-significant” historical figures. Both are from my recent research on 20th-century Hungarian history.

A Wave Rider of the Collapse and the Force of “Biocracy”: Kálmán Zsabka

Revolutionary (in 1918), counterrevolutionary (in 1919), extreme right-wing street activist (during the 1920s and 1930s), Jewish rescuer resistant (in 1944), freedom fighter (in 1956), and at the end of his life a decorated anti-fascist hero. These represent the key roles Kálmán Zsabka (1897–1971) played during his politically turbulent and often contradictory career.¹⁴ At the same time, however, the complexity or even the

¹¹ GIOVANNI LEVI, *Frail Frontiers?*, Past & Present 242/2019, Issue Supplement 14, pp. 41–42.

¹² DAVID T. ROTH, *Brief Lives: A Microhistorical Approach*, in: *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden–Boston 2021, p. 122.

¹³ DAVID VELTMAN, *Une génération spontanée’: Kandinsky Seen through the Eyes of Felix de Boeck (1898–1995)*, in: *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden–Boston 2021, pp. 141–142.

¹⁴ Kálmán Zsabka was born in 1897 in Znióváralfa (today Kláštor pod Znievom, Slovakia), in “Felvidék,” a part of the northern part of historical Hungary, which was annexed to Czechoslovakia after the First World War. He studied acting and fought in the First World War, then found his place in various extreme right-wing movements in Hungary. He was an instigator of many street disturbances, for which he was held and used by the police. From 1938 onwards, his task was to disrupt the pro-Nazi extreme right. Zsabka tried to make a name for himself in the public eye as a poet, performer, actor, film producer, and director. In 1944, as commander of one of Budapest’s paramilitary units, he played a major role in the Hungarian resistance. After 1945, he lived in seclusion and only briefly became active during the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle. He was not harmed during the reprisals and died as a pensioner in Budapest in 1971. ÁKOS BARTHA, NÁNDOR PÓCS, ANDRÁS SZÉCSÉNYI, *Egy hosszan „ébredő” túlélőművész. Zsabka Kálmán pályarajza (1897–1971), I*, Múltunk 64/2019, no. 2, pp. 138–181 and ÁKOS BARTHA, NÁNDOR PÓCS, ANDRÁS SZÉCSÉNYI, *Egy hosszan „ébredő” túlélőművész.*

adventurousness of Zsabka’s life is not intrinsically interesting, but rather it gives us a glimpse into particular moments in 20th-century Hungarian history, such as the revolutionary period following the First World War, at the level of the individual actor.

On October 31, 1918, the democratic revolution triumphed in Budapest and the pacifist government of Mihály Károlyi came to power. It was 33 years later, in the darkest days of the Stalinist dictatorship in Hungary, that Zsabka detailed on paper his experiences of the 1918 revolution. It is important to stress that autobiography was an important social practice of the Soviet-style regimes, meant primarily to demonstrate political commitment. The German historian Lutz Niethammer has even called communist regimes “biocracies,” referring to the prominent role of politically-motivated biographies in these states. In the countries behind the Iron Curtain, class struggle and anti-fascism became the main conceptual constructs by which citizens were categorised.¹⁵ Another struggle, the struggle for independence against the Habsburgs, was also of crucial importance to the Hungarian Stalinist dictatorship’s view of history.¹⁶

In his 1951 autobiography, Kálmán Zsabka said that he met the “grey soldiers of the anti-war, Hungarian independence, anti-Habsburg and revolutionary movements” in the summer of 1918, when he, as an ensign, was convalescing in Budapest after being wounded on the front. In fact, he recalls that in the weeks before the revolution he had already taken part in demonstrations, where he had agitated the soldiers who had been ordered against the demonstrators with a speech to “refuse further participation in the war and stand up for the idea of independence and revolution.”¹⁷ Zsabka also wrote that he was assigned immediately “after

Zsabka Kálmán pályarajza (1897–1971), II, Múltunk 64/2019, no. 3, pp. 234–278.
 ÁKOS BARTHA, *Az összeomlás hullámlovasa: Zsabka Kálmán (ellen)forradalmi karriere, Történeti Tanulmányok XXIX/2021*, pp. 286–305.

¹⁵ LUTZ NIETHAMMER, *Biografie und Biokratie. Nachdenken zu einem west-deutschen Oral History-Projekt in der DDR fünf Jahre nach der deutschen Vereinigung*, Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung 19/1996, no. 37, pp. 370–387. Cited by: RAINER M. JÁNOS, *Századosok*, Budapest 2018, p. 259. For Zsabka’s 1951 autobiography: ÁKOS BARTHA, *Ellendíllás és elhallgatás: Zsabka Kálmán esete a kommunista „biokráciával”*, Lymbus 2019, pp. 655–678.

¹⁶ ISTVÁN PAPP, *A magyar kommunisták 1918–1989*, Budapest 2024, pp. 155–157.

¹⁷ Institute and Museum of Military History – Military History Archives (Budapest, hereafter: HIM HL) AKVI 2466/1897.

the outbreak of the revolution,” first to the “revolutionary centre in the Astoria Hotel” and then to the City Command.¹⁸

Although anti-Habsburgism was indeed popular in Budapest in 1918,¹⁹ if we look at other sources we see a somewhat different picture. We know from a notary’s report that in November 1918, Zsabka led a unit of drunk soldiers who looted and raped in Kiskőrös,²⁰ and finally only a combined action of a machine-gun squad from the Ministry of War and the local National Guard could eliminate the atrocities.²¹ In the second week of November, as a member of the detachment of former Budapest city commander Viktor Heltai, Zsabka and his companions set off for Pozsony (Bratislava – Slovakia), with the aim, according to press reports, of killing the separatist Slovak leader Ferdiš Juriga, who was accused of espionage.²² According to Vilmos Tarján, a well-known journalist of the time, the “Heltai detachment consisted mostly of swindlers and murderers,”²³ and Károly Dietz, the chief of police of Budapest, said that the detachment, “instead of going against the Czechs,” plundered in the Upland.²⁴ Zsabka himself noted from this period in 1951: “I volunteered to go to the Felvidék from the armed forces and was assigned to various troops assigned to intercept advancing Czech troops. As I recall, I was ordered back to Budapest from the Felvidék in the first half of December 1918.”²⁵

Zsabka’s first serious scandal, the shooting on Rákóczi Road in Budapest, occurred on the night of December 27, 1918. The young ensign did not take kindly to a sergeant on patrol dispersing the crowd in cafés, bars, and cinemas. Knives, bayonets, and pistols were soon found, and order was restored only by the military and mounted police. The most seriously wounded was Zsabka himself (the press reported his death),²⁶

¹⁸ HIM HL AKVI 2466/1897.

¹⁹ PÁL HATOS, *Az elátkozott köztársaság. Az 1918-as összeomlás és forradalom története*, Budapest 2018, p. 232.

²⁰ Town in the Great Plain in Hungary.

²¹ Report of Jenő Bukovszky, retired municipal notary, retired lieutenant general. Budapest Municipal Archives (Budapest, hereafter: BFL), VII.18.d, 15/119, 1920 (Miklós Szili Török and his associates)

²² Népszava, 28 December 1918, p. 7; Az Est, 29 November 1918, p. 2.

²³ Az Est, 22 May 1921, p. 3.

²⁴ KÁROLY DIETZ, *Októbertől – augusztusig*, Budapest 1920, p. 48.

²⁵ HIM HL AKVI 2466/1897. Autobiography of Kálmán Zsabka.

²⁶ Népszava, 27 December 1918, p. 8.

who claimed to be innocent during his interrogation.²⁷ However, the authorities did not accept his confession and, although he was released, the prosecutor ordered proceedings against him.²⁸ The proceedings could easily have ended in a court martial, but two weeks later, on March 21, 1919, the Soviet Republic came to power in Hungary.

During the 133 days of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, Zsabka participated in the Hungarian Red Army, in the "fighting against the Czechs in the Upland,"²⁹ although in the 1920s – as a right-wing extremist of the counter-revolution³⁰ – he also drew attention to his other struggles from this period. In 1925, he testified that he and his comrades had killed two Jews during the "counter-revolutionary coup in Krisztinaváros"³¹ because they had attacked a Catholic procession.³² The only flaw concerning this story is that the only casualty of that "coup" was a local citizen shot dead by the retreating Red Guard.³³

After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the rise to power of the counter-revolutionary regime led by Miklós Horthy, Zsabka was arrested and detained in Miskolc³⁴ by a counter-revolutionary "military terror squad" for political reasons – at least according to his own testimony

²⁷ "Kálmán Zsabka, who had been warned that the patrol leader who had dragged the drunken soldier off with him was here, fired at the patrol leader. The bullet grazed the sergeant-major's collar. The patrol leader then immediately fired at Zsabka. Zsabka fired again, and his bullet wounded someone in the crowd, but it was impossible to say who. (...) During the interrogation, Kálmán Zsabka said that he had been in the Roboz bar with several fellow soldiers and left after closing time. He saw the soldiers shooting at each other on the corner of Luther Street and Rákóczi Road and wanted to ask the commander of the People's Guard what was happening. Then he fired twice and one of the bullets pierced his stomach." *Az Est*, 28 December 1918, p. 3. Translated from Hungarian by the author

²⁸ HIM HL 1920 ált. 13. oszt. (bűnügy) Zsabka Kálmán. Letter from the military commander of the Budapest district prosecutor to the Ministry of the Interior. 7 March 1919.

²⁹ HIM HL AKVI 2466/1897. Autobiography of Kálmán Zsabka.

³⁰ The political elites of the Horthy era between 1919 and 1944 were counter-revolutionary in two senses: on the one hand, they were strongly opposed to the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, but they also condemned the 1918 revolution, which they saw as leading to the collapse of historical Hungary and the establishment of a communist dictatorship.

³¹ A part of the Hungarian capital at the foot of Buda Castle.

³² Zsabka's signed statement is published in: *Esti Kurír*, 21 February 1925, p. 10.

³³ SÁNDOR NAGY, *Red Riding in White Buda: Bloody Midsummer Day procession in Krisztinaváros, 22 June 1919: case study*, *Rubicon* 2/2011, pp. 39–41.

³⁴ City in northeastern Hungary.

in 1951.³⁵ However, his arrest was not really for political reasons. The military commander in Miskolc had reported to the War Ministry on February 1, 1920 that Zsabka had posed as a lieutenant, “received the salary due to that rank,” “seriously damaged the treasury,” and repeatedly commandeered civilians, and was therefore prosecuted for fraud and abuse of official authority.³⁶ After his release under unclear circumstances, he quickly adapted to the political changes, i.e. the counter-revolutionary Horthy-regime. He was assigned to the national defence department of one of the most important counter-revolutionary organisations in Hungary, the Association of Awakening Hungarians (Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete, or ÉME).³⁷ He was also “assigned as an investigating officer” to the officers located in the Britannia Hotel in Budapest, who committed a series of murders and other crimes.³⁸ This was the beginning of his counter-revolutionary career – no less rich in scandals.

The short section of Zsabka’s biography that is presented here is not only a reminder of the limited value of politically motivated autobiographies or any ego-documents of notorious liars. At the same time, the control sources also made it clear that ideological categories (revolutionary vs. counter-revolutionary) can in some cases obscure real motivations. The same people can appear behind totally different political regimes, such as those troublemakers who see various armed violence organisations and anarchic conditions not primarily as political but as an opportunity for assertion.³⁹ One of them was Kálmán Zsabka, who was

³⁵ HIM HL AKVI 2466/1897. Autobiography of Kálmán Zsabka.

³⁶ HIM HL 1920 ált. 13. oszt. (bűnügy) Zsabka Kálmán.

³⁷ The ÉME, which went public at the beginning of 1919, was one of the main gathering places for the right-wing radicals of the counter-revolutionary regime in Hungary. The anti-Semitic organisation, which was finally disbanded in 1945, attracted attention with mass meetings, fights, and minor acts of terrorism.

³⁸ *Az Est*, 26 October 1927, p. 7. For more data concerning atrocities committed by “Britannia officers”: BÉLA BODÓ, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, London–New York 2019, pp. 86, 123, 132–133, 157–158, 167, 277. Zsabka was also involved in the murder of policeman József Soltra on 10 November 1920 in Budapest. This event led the Hungarian government to start the liquidation of counter-revolutionary detachments. ÁKOS BARTHA, *Az utolsó csepp a pohárban: Soltra József rendőr meggyilkolása és a tisztíkülönítmények pacifikálása*, In: *Csoportosulás, lázadás és a társadalom terrorizálása. Rendészettörténeti tanulmányok 2*, (edd.) Jámbor Szerk, Ilona Orsoly, Gábor G. Tarján, Budapest 2019, pp. 28–46.

³⁹ For examples of individuals switching sides between the Red and White terrors in Hungary, see: GUSZTÁV GRATZ, *A forradalmak kora. Magyarország története*

armed during the democratic revolution of 1918, the Soviet Republic of 1919, and the subsequent counter-revolutionary regime. Zsabka always recounted his experiences of 1918–19 in a way that fit the dominant political narrative of the time. In other words, he emphasised his counter-revolutionary struggles between the two world wars and his struggle for freedom after 1945. This was by no means exceptional; what was exceptional was not his changeable narrative identity, but the constancy of his career.

Thus, from a moral or psychological perspective, Zsabka does not represent such an exceptional case as Ignaz Trebitsch-Lincoln, the international impostor who served virtually every possible power in the First World War and the years that followed.⁴⁰ Zsabka rather exemplifies a broader category of politically-adaptive actors. In the aftermath of the First World War, hundreds of thousands of Germans, Poles, Greeks, and members of other minority groups fled the anarchic conditions that had emerged following the collapse of state authority. These circumstances were further exacerbated by the looting and requisitioning carried out by Bolsheviks, White forces, and various paramilitary groups which in many cases were perpetrated by refugees (such as Zsabka).⁴¹

Kálmán Rátz and the Social-Democratic Romance of a "Typical Hungarian Fascist Organisation"

In addition to the above-mentioned ÉME, the Hungarian National Defence Association (Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület, or MOVE) was the most important movement base of the Hungarian counter-revolution of 1919.⁴² However, while ÉME was a civilian organisation, MOVE was

1918–1920, Budapest 1935, p. 267. In 1920, a membership review was conducted within ÉME due to similar cases. TIBOR ZINNER, *Az ébredők fénykora, 1919–1923*, Budapest 1989, p. 61.

⁴⁰ BERNARD WASSERSTEIN, *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln*, New Haven–London 1988, pp. 93–198.

⁴¹ PHILIPP THER, *The Dark Side of Nation-states. Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*, New York–Oxford 2016, pp. 66–67, 73.

⁴² MOVE was founded during the democratic revolution of 1918 primarily as an advocacy organisation for returning soldiers. The association took a political (counter-revolutionary) turn and was disbanded in February 1919. It was reestablished in Szeged in the summer of 1919, as this city, under French occupation, was not under the authority of the Soviet Republic. After Miklós Horthy came to power, MOVE

a military association and retained its militaristic character in later years. One of its first presidents was Gyula Gömbös, Prime Minister of Hungary between 1932 and 1936. The leadership of the association was closely linked to the political elite of the Horthy era (1920–1944) and later its assessment was similar to that of the political system of interwar Hungary. As a consequence, since in the early 1970s it was still quite common in Hungarian historiography to describe the whole inter-war Hungary as “Horthy fascism,”⁴³ the only monographic overview of MOVE published in 1972 interpreted the veterans’ association as a “typical Hungarian fascist organisation.”⁴⁴ The fact that politics imposed strict limits on what could and could not be written about MOVE, both before and after 1945, was something I came across during my biographical research on Kálmán Rácz.⁴⁵

The self-organisations of Hungarian officers in the autumn of 1918 are usually – largely based on their own later self-definitions – assessed as counter-revolutionary associations, although they were originally at least as much advocacy organisations as political ones. Their objectives were

became one of the largest and most important counter-revolutionary organisations in Hungary between the two world wars. For details: ÁDÁM LAJKÓ, *A Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület*, Budapest 2024 (diss.).

⁴³ IGNÁC ROMSICS, *A Horthy-rendszer jellegéről. Historiográfiái áttekintés*, in: Magyar évszázadok. Tanulmányok Kosáry Domokos 90. születésnapjára, (ed.) Mária Ormos, Budapest 2003, pp. 207–219.

⁴⁴ RUDOLFNÉ DÓSA, *A MOVE. Egy jellegzetes magyar fasiszta szervezet 1918–1944*, Budapest 1972.

⁴⁵ Kálmán Rácz (Rácz) (1888, Komárom – 1951, Bischofzell): military officer, politician. In 1915, he became a Russian prisoner of war. After living through the Bolshevik takeover in Russia, he returned to Hungary and became one of the founders of MOVE. He retired in the mid-1930s, obtained a doctorate in humanities, and worked as a politician, publicist, and geopolitical expert. He was regarded as a leading Russianist of the Horthy era and the only Hungarian MP who could negotiate in Moscow in the interwar period (in 1941). He was a pro-government MP from 1935 to 1938, a pro-Nazi National Socialist in 1938–39, and an independent socialist after 1940. Rácz was in contact with both the far-right and far-left circles in Hungary and inspired the temporary national socialist turn of one of Hungary’s most famous poets, the canonised leftist Attila József (1905–1937), in 1933. Ten years later, however, he was making some of the most daring anti-war speeches in the Hungarian House of Representatives, and his party was backed by Zionists. After the German occupation of Hungary, in the spring of 1944, he was deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp. After the war, Rácz emigrated to the West and died in Switzerland. (My biography on Kálmán Rácz will be published in autumn 2025.)

dominated by pension issues and the need to preserve officer prestige, while internal conflicts (e.g. over rank) also divided them.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it is certain that some of the members of the military interest organisations set up in Hungary in the autumn of 1918, after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, still considered the protection of the country's borders to be their duty. For them, the major policy issue of the time was of interest to the extent that the government would guarantee the fight for self-defence or not.

In the government of Károlyi Mihály (October 31, 1918 – January 11, 1919),⁴⁷ who gradually became disillusioned with Wilsonian pacifism, there were several ideas about the army, and then several rival military-political forces emerged. By December 1918, one plan was to organise a social-democratic-based army. The driving force behind this idea was Vilmos Böhm, State Secretary at the Ministry of War.⁴⁸ It is hardly a coincidence that on December 9, 1918, MOVE sent a delegation to the editorial offices of the social-democratic daily newspaper, where they declared that their members were "all for the republic and the people's government"⁴⁹ and at the same time offered the services of the association to the Károlyi government.⁵⁰

Since the most powerful forces in Hungary at that time were the social-democratic trade unions and because both Austria and Germany, the countries of World War comrades, had social-democratic governments at the time, it may seem strange only today that many officers were oriented in this direction. Even the author of the MOVE booklet published in 1920 did not deny that a certain "Captain R." proposed among them that "this body take a decision to send a fraternal greeting to the Social Democratic Party on the occasion of today's inauguration. (Enthusiastic, prolonged cheering, applause!)." The captain was so committed to the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (Magyarországi

⁴⁶ Budapesti Hírlap, 7 November 1918, p. 6. Budapesti Hírlap, 13 November 1918, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Károlyi Mihály was replaced by Dénes Berinkey as a Prime Minister in January 1919, while Károlyi became President of the Republic. However, these changes did not affect the nature of the political system.

⁴⁸ TAMÁS RÉVÉSZ, *Nem akartak katonát látni? A magyar állam és hadserege 1918–1919-ben*, Budapest 2019, p. 105.

⁴⁹ *Fehér Gárda*, Népszava, 10 December 1918, p. 1.

⁵⁰ MIKLÓS KOZMA, *Összeomlás 1918–1919-ben*, Köröstárkány–Balatonfőkajár 2020, p. 5.

Szociáldemokrata Párt, or MSZDP), which was in its heyday at the time, that when one of his comrades wanted to welcome “all similar parties,” he objected, because he believed that the MSZDP “created order, it stopped the rush of events.”⁵¹ The newspaper of the Hungarian left in exile later named the participants of this officers’ meeting, after they claimed to have a copy of the original minutes of the meeting, with signatures. Here “Captain R.” is listed as “Captain Kálmán Rácz,” who also supposedly said at this meeting that they “want to fight together with the Social Democratic Party.”⁵²

In late 1918, Rácz tried to organise the defence of his hometown, Komárom, with a few volunteers and officers. In the “general anarchy, only the industrial workers were a more organised and united group,” he later recalled, noting that the Komárom workers’ council had offered him the “armed services of the workers against the Czechs.” However, this, in his opinion, was a force of little fighting value, and so, after “unsuccessful battles,” Komárom Castle was finally abandoned on January 10, 1919.⁵³

That the MOVE did not eventually take a social-democratic turn was thanks to an agile captain of the general staff, Gyula Gömbös, who was elected president of the organisation on January 19, 1919. Gömbös was nominated by the organising officers instead of Kálmán Rácz. As one of them recalled, “Given that the majority of the assembly would be line officers, we first thought of Kálmán Rácz, who we knew would speak well. But we held a rehearsal and found that his presentation style was excellent for the rank and files, but perhaps less suitable for the officers. So, we then asked Gömbös to give the speech.”⁵⁴ Gömbös was

⁵¹ BÉLA MARTON BERETHEI, *A Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület történetének és alapgondolatának vázlatja*, Budapest 1920, pp. 14–15. The author quotes the minutes of the “meeting of the national union of the actual officers etc.” of 15 November 1918, although the Union of Actual Officers, which was a union of officers susceptible to social democracy, formed a month later. T. RÉVÉSZ, *Nem akartak katonát látni?*, p. 106. MOVE was founded at the end of November 1918, originally as the National Association of Acting Officers, Officers, Unclassified Regulars, Non-Commissioned Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers in Service. See *Az Ujság*, 1 December 1918, 1. (There has been considerable stability in the leadership of the various veterans’ organisations.)

⁵² *Akta a fehér terroristák vörös szerepéről. Aktív tisztek szakszervezeti gyűlése*, *Az Ember*, 10 July 1921, 11.

⁵³ KÁLMÁN RÁTZ, *Feltámadás!*, *Holnap* 15 October 1938, p. 1.

⁵⁴ M. KOZMA, *Összeomlás 1918–1919-ben*, p. 114.

then nominated and elected. Although the new president of MOVE tried to appear loyal to the government in public, behind the scenes he began counter-revolutionary organising. Gömbös conspired more skilfully than Rátz, who agitated officers to strike against the government.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Rátz's plan is remarkable, as a strike had not previously been an established means of asserting interests in the officer corps of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Rátz was arrested for his plan on 18 February 1919, and stayed in prison during the whole time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.⁵⁶ It was thus left out of the anti-communist conspiracies which were later considered meritorious and an advantage in the Horthy era. All this had a significant impact on Kálmán Rátz's career after 1919, and partly on his ideological extremism.

MOVE's declarations of loyalty to the Károlyi government later tried to be presented as "clever tactics,"⁵⁷ and the association's flirtation with social democracy was completely forgotten. Therefore, we are dealing here with an "exceptionally normal" phenomenon, a "hidden reality" that has remained hidden for decades. In his memoirs, Vilmos Böhm, who took up the post of Minister of Defence in January 1919, wrote that "the military officers, brought up in the monarchical and caste spirit, were lurching to and fro with the helplessness of despair" at the time of the collapse.⁵⁸ As we have seen, even the officers themselves did not deny this at first. According to a brochure published by the Szeged group of MOVE in August 1919, "the officers' corps faced the situation at the beginning of January [1919] of falling en bloque into the Social Democratic Party through the association."⁵⁹ The 1920 General Assembly was more cautious, but it did mention that during the 1918 republic "there had been a tendency to the left in the spirit of the officers' committee."⁶⁰ In the 1920 National Assembly, Gyula Gömbös himself recalled the times

⁵⁵ *Tiszti sztrájkot akartak szervezni ellenforradalmi céllal*, Népszava, 19 February 1919, p. 4.

⁵⁶ BFL, XVI.3, fogoly, 1919, 132, Fogolytörzskönyvek és -nyilvántartások.

⁵⁷ JÓZSEF RÉVAY, *Gömbös Gyula élete és politikája*, Budapest 1934, p. 121.

⁵⁸ JÓZSEF VONYÓ, *Gömbös Gyula és a hatalom: egy politikussá lett katonatiszt*, Pécs 2018, p. 127.

⁵⁹ *A „Move” ismertetése*, Szeged 1919, pp. 4–5.

⁶⁰ *A „MOVE” országos elnökségének nagygyűlési jelentése az 1919–20. és 21. évekről*, Budapest 1921, p. 3.

when “there was indeed a tendency to turn to the left” for MOVE,⁶¹ the “typical Hungarian fascist organisation.”

In fact, MOVE was not a typical fascist organisation, but rather a group formed by officers who, in a certain sense, behaved in a manner typical of their social and institutional background. MOVE’s romance with SDP is a “marginal or extreme case,” which is “in some respects typical of a larger area or a group.”⁶² The larger group was the officer corps of the Hungarian army, while the aspect of typicality can be discerned in the way the coercive apparatuses of the Hungarian state adapted to the political transformations during a turbulent period.⁶³

The case of MOVE and Captain Rátz was by no means without precedent in this period. German Colonel Max Bauer, who allied with the Hungarian counterrevolutionaries in 1920, had just a year earlier proposed an alliance between the German army, the German working class, and Russia against their common enemy, the Entente powers. Bauer explained his ideas on this matter to the communist, Karl Radek.⁶⁴ It is also important to remember that the father of fascism, Benito Mussolini, was originally socialised within the Italian Socialist Party prior to the First World War, and it was from this political milieu that he launched his public career, eventually becoming the leader of the Italian far right.⁶⁵ With regard to postwar international trends, we can conclude that although many postwar veterans’ organisations played a major role in the rise in power of the fascist and national socialist parties, in fact, the front fighters’ organisations of interwar Europe were ideologically quite diverse and there were even anti-fascist veterans’ associations.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Diary of the National Assembly, 1920–1922*, Vol. IV, p. 514. (17 August 1920)

⁶² MATTI PELTONEN, *Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research*, History and Theory 40/2001, no. 3, p. 357.

⁶³ See, for instance, the conduct of the Hungarian police during the communist takeover in 1919 or the far-right Arrow Cross coup in 1944. PÁL HATOS, *Rosszfiúk világforradalma. Az 1919-es Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság története*, Budapest 2021, p. 156; ÁKOS BARTHA, *Véres város. Fegyveres ellenállás Budapest, 1944–1945*, Budapest 2021, pp. 111–112.

⁶⁴ B. WASSERSTEIN, *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln*, p. 131.

⁶⁵ For details, see: ANTHONY JAMES GREGOR, *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1979.

⁶⁶ ÁNGEL ALCALDE, *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 249–257.

Iván Szüts and the First Hungarian “National Socialist” Parties

According to recent literature, one of the pioneers of the Hungarian national socialist parties, which co-opted the German model, was the Hungarian National Socialist Party (Magyar Nemzeti Szocialista Párt, or MNSZP). It was founded in 1930, during the Great Depression, by some members of the Bartha Miklós Society (Bartha Miklós Társaság, or BMT), a group of young middle-class Hungarians born outside the Trianon borders.⁶⁷ The Nazi categorisation of MNSZP does not seem to be a big surprise given the name of the party, and several of its founders (e.g. Miklós Csomóss, Kálmán Rátkay R., Iván Szüts) did indeed make a name for themselves as followers of Hitler in Hungary in the 1930s. The MNSZP was seen as “Hitlerist” by contemporary rivals of the founders,⁶⁸ and their assessment was further confirmed by reminiscences (sometimes from the same circle).⁶⁹ It is also safe to say that the founding fathers of MNSZP had heard of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei and its leader, who was fighting for power, just as they could not have been completely unaware of the changing political trends and the various radical and third way theories that were emerging in the wake of the world crisis.

⁶⁷ ZOLTÁN PAKSY, *Nyilas mozgalom Magyarországon 1932–1939*, Budapest 2013, p. 69; RUDOLF PAKSA, *Magyar nemzetiszocialisták. Az 1930-as évek új szélsőjobboldali mozgalma, pártjai, politikusai, sajtója*, Budapest 2013, p. 59; JÓZSEF VONYÓ, *Jobboldali radikálisok Magyarországon 1919–1944. Tanulmányok, dokumentumok*, Pécs 2021, p. 277. Due to the Treaty of Trianon, signed in 1920, Hungary’s population dropped from 20.8 million (or 18.2 million discounting Croatia) to 7.9 million. “Out of a total of 10.6 million people in the detached lands, 3.3 million or 30,2 % were ethnic Hungarians (Magyars).” IGNÁC ROMSICS, *A Trianonhoz vezető út. Historiográfiai áttekintés*, Magyar Tudomány 181/2020, no. 6, p. 727.

⁶⁸ “We don’t want to be a subsidiary of the Hungarian National Socialist Party (of the Hungarian Hitlerites),” said Dániel Fábián and Attila József, among others. *Nyilatkozat*, Népszava, 1 November 1930, p. 20.

⁶⁹ DÁNIEL FÁBIÁN, *A résztvevő szemével (Adatok a Bartha Miklós Társaság történetéhez)*, Párttörténeti Közlemények 25/1979, no. 2, p. 207. TAMÁS KOVÁCS, *Rendőrségi célkerekseztben a szélsőjobb. Dr. Sombor-Schweinitzer József feljegyzése a szélsőjobboldali mozgalmakról, 1932–1943*, Budapest 2009, p. 40.

It was during my research on Iván Szüts that the MNSZP came to my attention.⁷⁰ The first surprise came when I picked up the party's programme, which is now a rare book. This publication was definitely a "clue" for me, "something that does not quite fit in with its immediate surroundings, something that seems odd or out of place."⁷¹ "The Hungarian National Socialist Party proclaims pure national democracy and socialism," the founders said, advocating universal and secret suffrage, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. The Hungarian National Socialists wanted to fight against "red internationalism," "Habsburg restoration propaganda," and "liberal big business," but also stressed that they were "fed up with pro-German clericalism" and overzealous "pseudo-patriotism." The party envisioned a revision of the Trianon peace based on a referendum, while proclaiming an "expansionist Hungarian Eastern and Central European policy."⁷²

At the February 1930 founding meeting of one of the MNSZP organisations in Budapest, they set the goal of "radical land reform," a new income-sharing policy, a wage minimum, and also demanded a "fair settlement" of the refugee and injured war veteran cases.⁷³ Even the liberal newspaper critical of the anti-Habsburg organisation founded by the MNSZP did not quote any signs of overtly anti-Semitic, totalitarian, or even autocratic politics from the party's speakers.⁷⁴ In the description of the memoirist, who had a grudge against the MNSZP, the party set up in

⁷⁰ Iván Szüts (1900, Sarajevo–1973, Budapest): lawyer, politician. In 1933, he became co-chairman of the Pro-Nazi National Socialist Hungarian Peasant and Workers' Party. In the summer of 1934, Szüts left the party and after a few weeks in the Smallholders' Party, he disappeared from public life for more than half a decade. He only returned in the autumn of 1940, founding the National Camp, which later, with government support, sought to disrupt the Pro-Nazi Arrow Cross Party. After the war, Szüts worked as an agent for the communist-run state security in several parties, and after 1956, also under the cover of the communist state security, he handled passports, visas, and emigration applications. ÁKOS BARTHA, *Egy nyughatatlan Homo Politicus: Szüts Iván (1900–1973) életútja*, Történelmi Szemle 65/2023, no. 3, pp. 591–614.

⁷¹ For Carlo Ginzburg's concept of "clue" in the context of exceptionality and typicality, see: M. PELTONEN, *Clues, Margins, and Monads*, p. 357.

⁷² Mit akar a Magyar Nemzeti Szocialista Párt? I. füzet. Budapest, d. n. National Széchényi Library, Collection of Posters and Small Prints Kny. B 921. 4–7.

⁷³ Pesti Hírlap, 11 February 1930, p. 8.

⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that at the inaugural meeting of the Anti-Habsburg League, there was a heated debate about whether to include the Social Democrats in the leadership. Magyar Hírlap, 23 July 1930, p. 3.

the BMT headquarters did not resemble a militarist or fascist formation. According to him, their party posters "announced the coming of a redemptive new ideal, 'National Socialism', with the short text 'National Socialists Forward!' on red paper."⁷⁵ As far as the BMT was concerned, according to a contemporary assessment, "three directions were struggling within the Society; a socialist, a national socialist and a fascist."⁷⁶ Thus, the national socialist faction was not the same as the fascist one; the two were distinguishable *at the time*.

Iván Szűts became secretary general and then executive chairman of MNSZP, but due to internal conflicts he did not lead the party for long,⁷⁷ instead creating his own party with some of his supporters. In retrospect (but even before 1945), he explained his decision by saying that he wanted a more pronounced socialist programme. He remembered the new formation – perhaps reflecting his own post-1934 sovereignist aims⁷⁸ – as the "Independent Hungarian National Socialist Party"⁷⁹ and this name has also seeped into the literature in multiple variations.⁸⁰ I use here the name National Socialist Party (Nemzeti Szocialista Párt, or NSZP), based on the original programme booklet. The party was founded in 1930, according to the later executive president, i.e. Szűts.⁸¹

The first president of the NSZP was Lajos Perley,⁸² who came from veteran organisations and founded the National Independent Front

⁷⁵ D. FÁBIÁN, *A résztvevő szemével*, p. 207.

⁷⁶ TIBOR KESERŰ, *Személytelen ember, személytelen állam. Esszé, értékeztetőredek és arcképek*, Budapest 1932, p. 89.

⁷⁷ Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Budapest, hereinafter: ÁBTL) 3.1.9. V-150806/1. 222. 2 August 1962.

⁷⁸ Szűts explained his turn to the Smallholders' Party by saying that the Hungarian national socialist movement had "taken a Hitlerian turn and lost its Hungarian character." Eckhardt Tiborhoz csatlakoztak a mérsékelt nyilaskeresztesek. *Ujság*, 10 July 1934, p. 6. From this point on, anti-Germanism was a feature of Szűts' career.

⁷⁹ IVÁN SZÜTS, *A nyilaskérdés megvilágítása. A magyar nemzeti szocializmus keletkezésének, kibontakozásának és elfajulásának története. II.*, Nemzeti Élet, 14 February 1943, p. 4.

⁸⁰ J. VONYÓ, *Jobboldali radikálisok Magyarországon 1919–1944*, pp. 277, 518, 520. GÁBOR BALOGH, *A Római Katolikus Egyház és a nemzetiszocialisták Magyarországon*, Budapest 2015, pp. 38–39.

⁸¹ Pesti Hírlap, 19 June 1932, p. 15. For the original text dated during the presidency of Lajos Perley, see ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-102442. 86–91. A Nemzeti Szocialista Párt gazdasági és politikai programja. Budapest, é. n.

⁸² ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-102442. 31. Autobiography of Dr. Iván Szűts. 21 May 1945.

Fighting Party (Országos Független Frontharcos Pártot, or OFFP) at the end of January 1931.⁸³ Perley provided a room for the NSZP at a veteran organisation's premises,⁸⁴ but he did not remain a national socialist leader for long, as, in March 1932, he resigned from the presidency and Iván Szüts took over the leadership of the NSZP.⁸⁵ According to a later newspaper article, Szüts founded the "green shirt Hungarian socialist movement" in the autumn of 1931, whose leadership included teacher Árpád Dobos, construction worker Géza Mándi, Kálmán Könyves-Tóth (vice-president of the BMT), and engineer Sándor Szathmáry.⁸⁶ Since the names of Dobos, Mándi, and Szathmáry (as well as Szüts and Perley) appear at the end of the original party programme of the NSZP,⁸⁷ the overlap between the "green Hungarian socialist movement" and the NSZP is obvious.

Both Szüts and Perley pointed out in their 1945 testimonies that the NSZP, which was intended to be more left-wing than the MNSZP, also cooperated with the Social Democrats.⁸⁸ We know nothing about the content of this, but the OFFP and the MSZDP did cooperate in the 1931 elections,⁸⁹ and the political programme of the NSZP, which was fighting for "state socialism," does not make it inconceivable that there was some kind of agreement with the Social Democrats. Furthermore, it is quite certain that the NSZP programme, like that of the MNSZP, lacked important cornerstones of Nazi ideology such as racism, anti-Semitism, and the *Führerprinzip*. Instead, the NSZP aimed to abolish birth privileges, gender equality before the law, freedom of religion and belief, a minimum wage, maximum earnings, universal employment, and

⁸³ *Magyarországi politikai pártok lexikona, 1846–2010*, (ed.) István Vida, Budapest 2011, p. 170.

⁸⁴ Ujság, 11 September 1932, p. 5.

⁸⁵ Nemzeti Ujság, 11 March 1932, p. 7.

⁸⁶ ENDRE SZABÓ, *Egy ős nemzeti szocialista levele a „Magyar Nemzet”-hez*, Magyar Nemzet 26 April 1941. The green shirt later became the emblematic garment of various Hungarian national socialist ("arrow cross") parties. For details: NICHOLAS M. NAGY-TALAVERA, *The Green Shirts and the Others – A History of Fascism in Hungary and Romania*, Stanford 1970.

⁸⁷ ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-102442. 91.

⁸⁸ Testimony of Lajos Perley at the Political Police Department of the Hungarian State Police Headquarters in Budapest. 25 August 1945, ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-102442. 12.; Curriculum vitae of Szüts Iván. May 1945. [unreadable day], ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-102442. 31.

⁸⁹ Népszava, 27 June 1931, p. 6.

restrictions on private property. The influence of the veterans' organisation can be felt in the military development objectives and the desire to end state reparations payments, as well as in the vaguely bellicose foreign policy concept.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, it is clear from the programmes that neither the MNSZP nor the NSZP was "Hitlerist." It was only later that some of their leaders became so.

Szüts's own micro-parties never made it into the Hungarian legislature, just as he himself never became a member of parliament in the Horthy era or a policymaker otherwise. Since he did not make any lasting impression outside the political arena, we are dealing with a rather insignificant historical figure, who was the focus of my research mainly because of his long and winding public career. However, the biographical research, which in this sense seems somewhat self-serving, ended up with a significant political-historical result, as it managed to correct our knowledge of the adaptation of the Nazi-type extreme right in Hungary. In other words, the "historical context" has been corrected, in the words of Nigel Hamilton.

Conclusion

As we have seen, "from an apparently exceptional document, a historian can extrapolate typical and relevant indicators, not just exceptional stories."⁹¹ Thus, "exceptional" documents can play a key role in micro-historical research because they "highlight the 'normal' discontinuities, contradictions and fragmentations of the historical fabric."⁹² The cases presented here have not been explored at the organisational or prosopographical level of historical research; this required the research of three historical actors, who could hardly be considered very significant. This is how the biographies of Kálmán Zsabka, Kálmán Rátz, and Iván Szüts,

⁹⁰ "With regard to Trianon, we accept a peaceful solution that ensures the prosperity, livelihood and future of the Hungarian people. If the peaceful revision does not materialize, our party will use every means and seize every opportunity to regain the territories to which the Hungarians are entitled." ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-102442. 91. A Nemzeti Szocialista Párt gazdasági és politikai programja. Budapest, é. n.

⁹¹ FRANCESCA TRIVELLATO, *Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?*, California Italian Studies 2/2011, p. 4.

⁹² CHRISTIAN G. DE VITO, *History Without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective*, Past & Present 242/2019, Issue Supplement 14, p. 362.

although not (very) significant on their own, could be useful for social and political history. The case of Zsabka nuances the ideology-centred typology of revolutionary violence, and the case of Rátz tells us something new about the political relations of veterans' organisations at the end of the First World War, while the political career of Iván Szüts proves that it is always worth looking behind the words that make up a title if we are also curious about the content of the words. These were all atypical, "exceptionally normal" cases, which only occurred in abnormal circumstances (a political cataclysm or a world economic crisis). However, because they did occur, they are all part of a reality that once existed, and which may be of interest to future historians.