

Vilmos Erős

The “Prussian Way” versus the “Third Road”: Peasant-History in Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s—the Case of István Szabó

ABSTRACT

The following article analyses the pivotal moments that allowed Marxist-Stalinist historiography became the official approach in the Hungarian historical profession in the late 1940s. One of the main targets of Communist/Marxist historians were István Szabó (1898–1969), a professor at the University of Debrecen, and his followers, who were under continuous attack from Marxist historians. It will be argued here that the main motivation behind these attacks was the fact that István Szabó challenged the “master-narrative” of contemporary Hungarian Marxist historiography, namely the concept of “second serfdom,” which was also linked to a conception of the development of the Hungarian economy and Hungarian society that had “turned away” from the development of Western Europe and followed an Eastern-European path instead. Szabó challenged this account, and instead argued for Hungary’s “transitional” position between Western and Eastern Europe. His ambition was to offer a “alternative third road” between capitalism and socialism. In this endeavour, he relied heavily on the legacy of the so-called “populist” writers and thinkers of the interwar period (such as László Németh, István Bibó, István Hajnal).

Keywords: *rural history; homogenization/Gleichschaltung; Marxist-Stalinist historiography; “Second serfdom;” “Prussian way;” “East-Central European development;” “third way”*

The professionalization of Hungarian historiography took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the period of the so-called Austro-Hungarian Dualism.¹ Although political-ideological motives (such as the rise in institutionalization) played a significant role in this process, the era was nonetheless deeply marked by an at-

1 On Hungarian historical writing in the age of Dualism in English, see Steven Béla Várdy, *Clio’s Art in Hungary and Hungarian America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

mosphere of freedom in academia, in tune with the general liberal political attitude of the century. For most of the period between the two World Wars, this tendency continued. The academic climate of the period was characterized by openness; only immediately before and during the Second World War were some historians forced to emigrate.² All this changed significantly in 1945, and then especially after 1948. Between 1945–1948, many historians (András Alföldy, József Deér, Károly Kerényi, Gyula Miskolczi) chose the path of emigration, and in 1948, the Stalinist-Communist takeover engendered an entire “Gleichschaltung,” or homogenization, of historical scholarship. This process included many components, among them the removal of several “bourgeois” historians from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an ideological-political reckoning with the representatives of the so called “Geistesgeschichte,” the over-emphasis on the history of labor movements (mainly that of the Communist Party), the so-called “citatalogie” (namely the constant citation of the classics of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism,³ instead of rigorous source criticism), and the forcible emphasis on the impact of Slavic-Russian influences on Hungarian history.⁴ A further crucial phenomenon, beginning in the second half of the 1940s, was the oppression of non-Marxist historians of rural history,⁵ chief among them István Szabó.⁶ The purpose of the following study is to account for the key moments in this process.

- 2 See Steven Béla Várdy, *Modern Hungarian Historiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976). It should be noted that many Hungarian (mostly Jewish) scholars (many of whom later gained international renown) were forced into emigration, but none of them were outstanding historians. See Tibor Frank, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009). To a certain extent, Henrik Marczali's complaints in 1927 may have been justified, since he was marginalized because of his alleged role in the events of the 1918/1919 revolutions. See Henrik Marczali, “Hongrie,” *Histoire et historiens depuis cinquante ans: Méthodes, organisation et résultats du travail historique de 1876 à 1926*, ed. Christian Pfister (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1927), 209–218.
- 3 See Vilmos Erős, and Ádám Takács, ed., *Tudomány és ideológia között: Tanulmányok az 1945 utáni magyar történetírásról* (Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2012).
- 4 About these phenomena, see Deák, István, “Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Hungary,” *American Historical Review* 97, no. 4 (1992). Árpád von Klimó, “La statalizzazione della Storia (I tentativi di creare una storia ungherese nazionale 1948–56),” *Le Carte e la Storia* 5, no. 2 (1999). For an account of similar tendencies in other Eastern-European communist countries, see Maciej Maria Górný, “Historical Writing in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary,” *Oxford History of Historical Writing*, Vol. 5, ed. Axel Schneider, Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 243–265.
- 5 On Hungarian rural history, see Steven Béla Várdy, “Domanovszky and the Hungarian Civilization or Kulturgeschichte School,” in *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, ed. Várdy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 161–174.
- 6 István Szabó was born in Debrecen in 1898, the son of a poor artisan. He went to school and studied at the university in his hometown and in Szeged, where he first became a journalist, then Assistant Professor at the Institute of History. In 1928, he moved to Budapest,

Attacks against Szabó in the 1940s

Major attacks against Szabó began in 1948. The basis for these charges were Szabó's two books, published the same year: one, entitled *Debrecen, the Capital City of the War of Independence of 1848–49* (fought against the Habsburgs) was only edited by him, and depicts and analyses in detail the most important events of this Revolution in Debrecen to commemorate the centenary of The Hungarian Revolution of 1848/49.⁷ The volume's concept sparked fierce assaults in the pages of journals such as *Társadalmi Szemle* and *Valóság*, in the leading history journal *Századok* and a number of local newspapers.⁸ These harsh reactions often came from non-professional historians, such as Tibor Balázs, Vera Balázs, Tibor Csabai, although later well-known “professional” historians slandered the book as well, including György Spira, Pál Sándor, and Péter Hanák.⁹ In short, these critics argued that the volume was merely a positivist compilation of numerous events of the Revolution, without a sincere elaboration of the role and interests of working-class people. Furthermore, they held that the authors did not sufficiently highlight the role and importance of the Jacobins/the Left Wing Party in the Revolution, and sometimes even went as far as to mock the Jacobins. Conversely,

and worked at the National Archives of Hungary until 1943, when he returned to Debrecen and soon became Professor. In Budapest, he edited the most important journal for archival studies in Hungary, the *Levéltári Közlemények*, from 1937 onwards, and became a member of the so-called “Ethnohistory School” of Elemér Mályusz. After the Second World War, together with his students and colleagues, he founded a well-known school in rural history at the University of Debrecen, which represented a social-history approach, in opposition to the demands of the Communist era. After his continuous denigration in 1948–49, he was forced out of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He (and his students) took part in the revolutionary events in Debrecen in 1956, and he became co-president of the Revolutionary Committee at the University. In 1958, he retired, and in the last decade of his life, edited three large volumes about the history of peasantry in Hungary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He died in 1969. In 1989, his membership in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was returned, and he was also posthumously awarded the “Széchenyi Prize.” See Várday, *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, 112–113.

- 7 István Szabó, *A szabadságharc fővárosa, Debrecen: 1849 január-május* (Debrecen: 1948).
- 8 Vilmos Erős, ed., *A harmadik út felé: Szabó István történész cikkeiben és dokumentumokban* (Budapest: Lucidus, 2006), 401–404.
- 9 *Századok* 82 (1948). 343–344 and 348. One wonders whether the main impetus behind the attacks against Szabó was a generation gap, since Szabó could have been regarded as an elderly historian after the Second World War, and even more so in the 1950s. However, this argument does not hold true, as similarly aged historians were among the attackers (Erzsébet Andics, Pál S. Sándor), and there were several younger scholars (János Varga, Jenő Szűcs, to some extent Károly Vörös, and later Vera Zimányi) who shared Szabó's views. A special case is Péter Hanák, who later became significantly more appreciative of Szabó's ideas.

the authors were not critical enough, apologetic toward or even positively biased towards the “traitors” of the Revolution, namely the politicians of the so-called “Peace Party,” who were working towards a rational compromise with the Habsburg regime.¹⁰ These kinds of arguments coincided with an attack against Szabó’s second 1948 volume published by the so-called “Teleki Institute” (at that time already known as a “bourgeois” institution within the historical profession). The chief authors of these critical texts were again György Spira, Pál Sándor, Péter Hanák, Pál Pach Zsigmond, writing for *Századok* and *Társadalmi Szemle*. Szabó’s book, entitled *Studies in the History of the Hungarian Peasantry* [Tanulmányok a magyar parasztság történetéből.] mostly encompassed previously published essays about the history of peasantry in Hungary (from the Middle Ages to early modernity to nineteenth century).¹¹ The collection came under attack mainly due to its analysis of the aforementioned Revolution of 1848/49. Szabó maintained that the revolutionary laws of 1848/49 concerning serfs attempted to abolish this social class in the most progressive way in Eastern/ rather East-Central Europe.¹² Szabó claimed that Kossuth was therefore right when he championed this policy, which sought to establish the so-called “free land property.”

According to his critics, Szabó’s evaluation represented the interests of landlords and nobility, while they contended that the best solution for social problems would have been a general “land-distribution,” which would have provided land and property for all liberated serfs, and at the same time would have eradicated all other remnants of “feudal” contracts that were disadvantageous for serfs (this was the policy of the “radical left.”)¹³

10 For Szabó’s response, see Vilmos Erős, “Szabó István körül,” *Aetas* 15, no. 3 (2000), 110–126.

11 István Szabó, *Tanulmányok a magyar parasztság történetéből* (Budapest: Teleki Pál Tudományos Intézet, 1948).

12 See “A jobbágybirtok problémái 1848/49-ben [Problems of the Serf’s Plot in 1848/49]” in Szabó, *Tanulmányok a magyar parasztság történetéből* (Budapest: Teleki Pál Tudományos Intézet, 1948), 311–396.

13 See György Szabad, “Szabó István a felszabaduló jobbágyság földtulajdonlási igényéről,” in *Szabó István Emlékkönyv*, ed. Rácz István (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1998), 302–309.

Attacks in the 1950s and 1960s

The polemics surrounding Szabó's work were not finished, and, in some historians' opinion, the representatives of the Marxist-Stalinist historiography who gained absolute power in these years even regarded him as their primary adversary, standing for the obsolete and abject “bourgeois” view of rural history.¹⁴ One of the most striking elements of the attempts to undermine him was that in the 1950s, the editorial responsibilities of the so-called “Peasant Fontes” series and volumes were taken out of his hands (he was deprived of the opportunity to edit the volumes—although he was the one who came up with the idea of the series immediately after the Second World War).¹⁵ The volumes in question were eventually published as edited by Éva H. Balázs (*Letters of the Serfs*), Endre Varga (*Landlord Tribunal Papers*) and Ferenc Maksay (*Urbarial Papers/Contracts*), respectively.¹⁶ The main accusation against Szabó was that he portrayed the relationship between landlords and serfs in these source-collections as “patriarchal,” peaceful and even reciprocal: he did not emphasize the “class struggle” between the fundamentally antagonistic social classes.¹⁷

The most severe offensive against Szabó was launched by Pál Sándor in 1954,¹⁸ who on the same basis, also challenged the tenets of the so-called “Hungarian Civilization History School” of Sándor Domanovszky (which existed between the two World Wars in Hungary¹⁹). Here too the argument was raised that this school depicted relations between landlords and serfs as too “patriarchal” and peaceful.²⁰ Szabó was still

- 14 Ignác Romsics, *Clio bűvöletében. Magyar történetírás a 19–20. században—nemzetközi kitekintéssel* [Under the Spell of Clio. Hungarian Historiography in the nineteenth-twentieth Centuries—with an European Outlook] (Budapest: Osiris, 2011); István Balogh, “Alkotás és tudományszervezés a politika szorításában,” in *Szabó István Emlékkönyv*, ed. Rácz István (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1998).
- 15 MTA KIK, Ms 5439/12 István Szabó, Pro memoria to the Source Collection: “Iratok a magyar parasztság történetéhez.”
- 16 See Vilmos Erős, ed. *A harmadik út felé (Szabó István történész cikkeiben és dokumentumokban)* [Towards a Third Way. The Historian István Szabó in Articles and Documents] (Budapest: Lucidus, 2006), 341–347.
- 17 See Éva H. Balázs, “A ‘jobbágylevelek’ ügyében,” *A harmadik út felé: Szabó István történész cikkeiben és dokumentumokban*, ed. Vilmos Erős (Budapest: Lucidus, 2006), 411–412.
- 18 Sándor Pál, “A magyar agrártörténeti irodalom kritikája,” *A harmadik út felé: Szabó István történész cikkeiben és dokumentumokban*, ed. Vilmos Erős (Budapest: Lucidus, 2006), 408–410.
- 19 Várdu, “Domanovszky and the Hungarian Civilization or Kulturgeschichte School,” *Modern Hungarian Historiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 161–174.
- 20 See Ignác Romsics, *Clio bűvöletében. Magyar történetírás a 19–20. században—nemzetközi kitekintéssel*, [Under the Spell of Clio. Hungarian Historiography in the nineteenth-twentieth Centuries—with an European Outlook, (Budapest: Osiris, 2011), 318.

bombarded for his perceived position on the events of 1848/49, a criticism that had already emerged in 1948: that he dismissed the “land-distribution” policy as a topical/ relevant and real alternative, thus he could not even be deemed a representative of the so-called “populist ideology”²¹ and peasant party (which was at that time regarded as semi-progressive, and formed a coalition with the Communist Party), but could rather be seen as supporting and even justifying the reactionary and fascist “Horthy régime” with its slogans of “unity and community of all Hungarians.”²²

Also, another case can be mentioned from the 1950s, relating to his abovementioned view on Kossuth’s serf policy in 1848/49.²³ The starting point of this dispute was that Szabó received a request (by the Hungarian Historical Society) to write a paper about Kossuth’s views regarding this question. Szabó’s manuscript was read with hesitation, entailing a lengthy editing process, as the editors were preparing the volume to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the world-famous statesman.²⁴ The editors sought once again to persuade Szabó to criticize Kossuth for erroneously advocat-

- 21 Gyula Borbándi, *Der ungarische Populismus* (Mainz: Hase&Koehler, 1976); Steven Béla Várdy, “The Populists and Their Criticism of Geistesgeschichte,” *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, ed. Steven Béla Várdy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 129–135.
- 22 István Szabó, “Nemesség és parasztság Werbóczi után,” in *Úr és paraszt a magyar élet egységében*, ed. Sándor Eckhardt (Budapest: Magyarságtudományi Intézet, 1941), 44–80.
- 23 See *Emlékkönyv Kossuth Lajos születésének 150.évfordulójára, I-II*, ed. Zoltán I. Tóth (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1952). In 1954, Szabó engaged in a fierce debate with György Székely, who, in his 1950s works, often criticized the so-called “bourgeois” historians, frequently Szabó himself, claiming that they did not sufficiently emphasize the significance of the serfs’ and the peasantry’s class-struggle. The debate between Szabó and Székely stemmed from their contrasting interpretations of the laws of 1351. During the debate, Szabó argued (repeating his conclusions from 1938) that these laws were not so much about the serfs’ opportunities to move, but about the tribunal authority of the landlords, and thus also not about the serfs’ tax burdens, the so-called “nona,” but about the obligation of the nobility and landlords to levy those taxes. Following the plague epidemics of 1348, numerous landlords could afford to waive this tax imposed on the serfs; a favour intended to attract as many serfs as possible to their properties. The lower nobility could not do without the taxes on their serfs, which is why they passed the 1351 law in the national assembly, where they were in the majority. In conclusion, Szabó argued that there had been a severe struggle between the classes, but not so much between the ruling classes and the peasantry as between the nobility and the landlords. (At that time, the situation of peasants was even improving—according to Szabó.) See György Székely, “A jobbágytság földesúri terheinek növelése és az erőszakapparátus további kiépítése,” in *Tanulmányok a parasztság történetéhez Magyarországon: a 14.században*, ed. György Székely (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1953); György Székely, “A jobbágyköltözés, mint a paraszti harc egyik jellemző formája,” in *Ibid.* (1953); Erős Vilmos, “A magyarság létét tápláló népi forrás: Szabó Istvánnak a magyar parasztság középkori történetével kapcsolatos munkái,” *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 58, no. 1–4 (2017).
- 24 György Szabad, *Kossuth politikai pályája ismert és ismeretlen megnyilatkozásai tükrében* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1977).

ing his “free land property” program. According to Kossuth’s (and Szabó’s) critics and Marxist-Stalinist historiography, a “land distribution” program would have allowed him to rely much more on the peasantry and the people, therefore he might have been more successful in the fight against the feudal enemy, i. e. the Habsburgs. Szabó agreed to modify his manuscript to a certain extent, however, he was unwilling to change his basic position, therefore, the editors eventually declined to publish his study in the Kossuth-volume. As a result, it only appeared in the journal “Századok”(1952), and the crucial last chapter in the Yearbook of the Institute of History of the Kossuth Lajos University of Debrecen in 1959.²⁵

Szabó was not exempt from criticism under the “Kádár régime” either. In 1960, for instance, Szabó published a study in French about the historical demography of Hungary in the late Middle Ages. On this occasion, a session was held in the Hungarian Institute of History, where Szabó’s essay was denounced for its “narodnik/populist” inclinations.²⁶ There was also a lot of hesitation concerning the volumes of “The History of Peasantry in Hungary in the Age of Capitalism” in 1965²⁷, as some members of the Institute of Historical Studies of Budapest withdrew their contributions from this project (or simply rejected Szabó’s call for papers). One of the contributors, Sándor Gyimesi entered into an escalating debate with his reviewer, Miklós Szuhay²⁸. Szuhay criticized Gyimesi’s view of the role of cooperatives, and claimed that the author ignored the class struggle between the different strata of peasant society, which had been left out of the whole project anyway. Gyimesi was labelled a non-Marxist historian by Szuhay.²⁹

- 25 István Szabó, “Kossuth állásfoglalása a parasztkérdésben 1848/49-ben,” *Acta Universitatis Debreceniensis*, ed. Zoltán Varga (Debrecen: KLTE, 1959), 29–46.
- 26 István Szabó, *La répartition de la population de Hongrie entre les bourgades et les villages dans les années 1449–1526* (Budapest: MTA, 1960), 6 and 25. The critics were probably embarrassed by Szabó’s statements, reiterating his previous views about the role of the market-towns as a platform for the improvement of the peasant’s lot from the Middle Ages onwards. At the same time, we can detect the ethnic motives behind Szabó’s assertions as he contrasts the “free royal towns,” inhabited by foreigners, with the market towns in question, downplaying the significance of the former in the social-economic development of Hungary.
- 27 *A parasztság Magyarországon a kapitalizmus korában (1849–1914) I–II*, edited by István Szabó (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1965).
- 28 Sándor Gyimesi, “A parasztság és a szövetségi mozgalmak,” in *A parasztság Magyarországon a kapitalizmus korában (1849–1914) I–II, II*, ed. István Szabó (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1965), 616–652.
- 29 MTA KIK, Ms 5440/86. Miklós Szuhay’s review about the study of Sándor Gyimesi. Budapest, 1963.

“Second serfdom,” “Prussian way,” “turning off”

Yet the question rightfully arises: in the end, what was the background of these nearly unceasing assaults on István Szabó?

In my view, the most striking and important drive behind these debates was the question of the so-called concept of a “second serfdom” (closely connected to the “Prussian way”), which gained absolute dominance and even became a “master narrative” in Hungarian historiography after the Communist/Stalinist political takeover in 1948/49.³⁰ This narrative borrowed many of its arguments from the “Hungarian Civilization History School” of Sándor Domanovszky, which existed between the two World Wars and first applied the theoretical model and concept of “Grundherrschaft” and “Gutsherrschaft.”³¹ In contrast to the “Geistesgeschichte” interpretation of Hungarian history that put much greater emphasis on the Western European influences on Hungarian development,³² this concept held that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the so-called “Gutsherrschaft” came to the fore again in Eastern European regions, i. e. the “domain/demesne” where the landlord had had his property cultivated on his own, and as a consequence, a socio-economic structure evolved that was different from that of Western Europe.³³

After 1948, Marxist historiography took up this theory and stretched it to its extremes, speaking not simply of a “turning away” from Western development, but expressis verbis elaborating on a unique and comprehensive Eastern European pattern.³⁴

30 From the international literature, see *Grand domaine et petites exploitations en Europe au Moyen Age et dans les temps modernes: Rapports nationaux*, ed. Péter Gunst-Tamás Hoffmann (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982).

31 See Imre Wellmann, “Mezőgazdaságtörténetünk új útjai,” *Domanovszky-Emlékkönyv*, ed. Imre Wellmann (Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda, 1937), 1–51.

32 On “Geistesgeschichte” see Vilmos Erős, “In the Lure of “Geistesgeschichte”: The Theme of Decline in Hungarian Historiography and Historical Thinking Between the Two World Wars,” *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire* 22, no. 3 (2015), 411–432. There is no exact English translation for the original German term, “Geistesgeschichte,” while the Hungarian expression used in the interwar period is a kind of “mirror translation” thereof. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that “Geistesgeschichte” is not at all the equivalent of the “history of ideas,” as it must be taken into consideration that the latter does not suggest such a complete and coherent message in epistemology, ontology of history, political philosophy, nor does it involve such a scepticism towards modern culture as “Geistesgeschichte” does. See furthermore Várdy, *Modern Hungarian Historiography*, 62–101.

33 On the Domanovszky school, see Tamás Csiki, *Társadalombrázolások és értelmezések a magyar történeti irodalomban (1945-ig)* (Debrecen: Ethnica, 2003).

34 Pál Pach Zsigmond, *Die ungarische Agrarentwicklung im 16–17. Jahrhundert: Abbiegung vom westeuropäischen Entwicklungsgang* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1964).

This model placed great emphasis on the overwhelming role of the property retained under the landlord’s management/“domain” (Gutswirtschaft), where the landlord had his property cultivated by relying on the ever-expanding services of his serfs. At the same time, the serfs’ situation began to deteriorate swiftly: the ranks of the so-called “corvée” serfs (forced to labour on the property of landlords, with nothing in exchange) began to swell radically, an “expelling” of the serfs from their tenancies (“Bauernlegen”), the scope of the lords’ monopoly on the so-called “ius regalia”— such as wine producing, meat selling, milling, etc.—proliferated.³⁵

Szabó had manifold connections with the abovementioned “Domanovszky school” and continuously rebutted these contentions of Marxist historiography. Already in many of his studies appearing in the second half of the 1940s³⁶, but especially in his volume published in 1948, he elaborated on the idea that the situation of Hungarian serfs in the Middle-Ages can be located somewhere in *between* Western and Eastern European developments.³⁷ For instance, he argued that the phenomenon of “desertification/depopulation” in that period was caused not so much by the gradually increasing exploitation of the serfs, but rather by the “sweeping effect” of market towns, which offered a possibility to improve serfs’ social position. This was eventually also the root cause of the Peasants’ Rebellion of 1514.³⁸

Szabó held similar views in 1947–48, concerning circumstances in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries,³⁹ asserting that although after the rebellion of György Dózsa in 1514, István Werbőczy imposed “eternal serfdom” and decreed that the serfs were “bound to the soil,” his laws could not have been enforced as serfs had the option to flee from the properties of the landlords. Furthermore they gradually gained more and more opportunities to own and establish their own properties, such as vineyards, cleared, pawned and rented lands, etc.⁴⁰ Szabó explicitly objected to and challenged the thesis of a “second serfdom” in the 1950s. In his abovementioned debate with György Székely, his reviewer’s opinions about university textbooks, and his letters to

35 See Ferenc Maksay, “Gutswirtschaft und Bauernlegen in Ungarn im 16. Jahrhundert,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 51, no. 1 (1958).

36 Étienne Szabó. “Les grands domaines en Hongrie au début des temps modernes.” [Large Estates in Hungary in the Early Modern Ages] *Revue d’Histoire Comparée* 5 (1947): 167–192; István Szabó (1947). *A jobbágy birtoklása az örökös jobbágyság korában* [Possessing Serfs in the Age of Perpetual Serfdom] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1947).

37 Étienne Szabó, “Du serf perpétuel au paysan libre” [From Perpetual Serfdom to Free Peasantry], *Nouvelle Revue de Hongrie* 63: 382–387; (1940): 382–387; Szabó, “Les grands domaines en Hongrie.”

38 “A középkorvégi parasztlázadások. 1437–1514,” *Tanulmányok a magyar parasztság történetéből*, ed. Szabó, István (Budapest: Teleki Pál Tudományos Intézet, 1948), 31–63.

39 Szabó, “Les grands domaines,” 188–189.

40 Szabó, “Les grand domaines”; Szabó, *A jobbágy birtoklása az örökös jobbágyság korában*.

other historians, such as Ferenc Maksay among others,⁴¹ serve as major evidence for his position.

In these documents Szabó consistently asserts that the phenomenon of a “second serfdom” did not exist in Hungarian social history as there had not even been a first one.⁴² The position of serfs (including their standard of living) was improving, the peasant society was at least somewhat stratified (it included several social layers/levels), and there were hardly any among them who had been deprived of their belongings. In terms of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the concept of a “second serfdom” are doubtful, to say the least, as the “Gutswirtschaft” and “domain” did not exclusively prevail, the number of “corvée” serfs was not continuously growing (the state and the Habsburgs—Maria Theresa, Joseph II—sometimes even offered serfs significant protections⁴³), large estates depended on serf-tenants to a considerable extent, thus the landlords had no interest in banishing them from their property (their revenues also came largely from serfs’ taxes and services), the “Bauernlegen” was basically unknown and therefore non-existent.⁴⁴ Serfs had numerous chances to improve their social status in this period as well, including becoming a “hajdú,”⁴⁵ or rise though the ranks of soldiers in the military fortresses

- 41 MTA KIK Ms 5440/17; Ms 5440/16; Ms 5440/14; *A harmadik út felé*, 310–319, 356–360, 362–368. Szabó’s reviews on the first volume of the university textbook.
- 42 For the Marxist literature on “second serfdom,” see Johannes Nichtweiss, “Zur Frage der zweiten Leibeigenschaft und des sogenannten preussischen Weges der Entwicklung des Kapitalismus in der Landwirtschaft Ostdeutschlands,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 1, no. 5 (1953).
- 43 See Stefan Szabó, “Ungarisches Bauerntum,” *Ungarn* 1 (1940): 219–227. See an excerpt from Szabó study in German. “Allein selbst bei dem Tiefstand des gesellschaftlichen Verfalls der ungarischen Leibeigenen wurde es nicht zur Regel, dass der Hörige selbst oder seine Familie dem Fronherrn innere persönliche Dienste leistete, wie dies in mehreren Teilen Osteuropas Sitte war. Stets bewahrte der ungarische Bauer einen Rest von Selbstständigkeit; er behielt seinen Charakter als Landwirt und sein Bewusstsein, das ihn zum Gefühl seiner Menschlichkeit erzog, blieb unberührt. Auch die eigenartigen Formen der ungarischen Bauernautonomien blühten zu dieser Zeit auf verheerten Boden in den durch Zuwanderungen aus verwüsteten Dörfern angeschwollenen Marktflächen des Tieflandes empor.” Szabó, “Ungarisches Bauerntum,” 225. The author has a so-called “colligation” of Szabó’s works on the Hungarian peasantry, arranged by Szabó himself after 1954. Szabó probably intended this “colligatum” for publication, an assumption supported by the fact that he maintained the ideas mapped out here throughout the 1950s and 1960s.
- 44 *A harmadik út felé*, 356–362. And István Szabó’s editors’ review on the introduction of Urbarial Volume edited by Ferenc Maksay. MTA KIK, Ms 5440/16; István Szabó’s letter to Ferenc Maksay. MTA KIK. Ms 5438/111.
- 45 István Szabó, “A hajdúk 1514-ben,” *Századok* 84, no. 1–4 (1950). I suppose that the British Communist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, painted a somewhat distorted picture about “hajdú-s,” labelling them as outlaws and proponents of “social banditism” (Hobsbawm 1959). For the immense (more reliable and credible) Hungarian literature on this social segment/stratum, see *A hajdúk a magyar történelemben III. Hajdú Bihar Megyei Múzeumok*

on the Ottoman Hungarian frontiers, they could obtain citizenship in market towns, they could even become nobles (gentry), or break out of their lower serf-positions via the so-called manumissio, exemptio, inscriptio, taxa, etc.⁴⁶

It is another question whether Szabó agreed with the concept of the so-called “Prussian way,” which is closely related to the “second serfdom” theory and mainly refers to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coming to the fore in Szabó’s research in the 1960s.⁴⁷ (According to Zsigmond Pál Pach, Gábor Gyáni, and József Köbli, the two concepts are basically identical.⁴⁸) In the volumes edited by Szabó in

Közleményei XXVIII ed. Dankó Imre (Debrecen: Déri Múzeum, 1975). As a rule, the studies in this volume follow in Szabó’s footsteps.

46 See Szabó, “A jobbágy megnemesítése,” *Turul* 55 (1941): 11–21. Similar views in János Varga, *Jobbágyrendszer a magyarországi feudalizmus kései századaiban 1556–1767* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1969).

47 István Szabó, ed., *A parasztság Magyarországon a kapitalizmus korában (1849–1914) I–II* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1965); István Szabó, ed., *Agrártörténeti Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1960).

48 See Pál Pach Zsigmond, “A magyarországi és oroszországi poroszutas agrárfejlődés egyező és eltérő vonásairól a 19. század második felében,” in *Közgazdasági Szemle* 5, no. 1 (1958): 79–90; József Köbli, “‘Porosz utas’ volt-e gazdaságfejlődésünk?,” *Medvetánc* 2–3 (1985); Gábor Gyáni, *Történetésdiskurzusok* (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2002), 231–261; Tamás Krausz, “A magyar történetírás és a marxizmus. Megjegyzések a ’kelet-európaiság’ problémájához,” *Eszmélet* 94, (2012). The latter represented a still extant Marxist point of view, adhering to the old ideology which holds that Hungary belongs to the Eastern-European development and region; Vilmos Erős, “Egy ‘polgári’ történész viszontagságai az 1950-es/1960-as években,” *Múltunk*, 4 (2020). In English, see Béla Király, “Neo-Serfdom in Hungary,” *Slavic Review* 34, no. 2 (1975). In his study, Király—although from the diaspora—basically supports the concepts of “second serfdom” and the “Prussian Way,” though he underscores that the Habsburgs, especially Maria Theresa and Joseph II played a positive role in protecting the serfs against their landlords. Still, he stresses that from the second half of the eighteenth century, the peasantry’s position began to deteriorate again, and talks about a “neo-serfdom,” a theory identical to that of the Marxist approach. Király refers to Szabó as well, but mainly in relation to the pre-1514 period and to the stratification of the peasantry at that time. Király, who had a pivotal role in the Revolution of 1956, conceived his view abroad, but probably acquired his knowledge on these issues before 1956 (he refers to the Marxist/Stalinist Imre Szántó and György Spira several times). After 1956, he echoed only the Marxist “clichés,” ignoring the trailblazing new studies produced by János Varga and György Szabad, whose approaches were very close to Szabó’s. For more on Szabad, see Zoltán Dénes Iván, ed., *Kitörés a kánonból: Szabad György történetírói munkássága* (Budapest: Ráció, 2018). An excerpt from Király’s study: “In the particular case of Hungary, neo-serfdom is to be seen as an economic, political, and social evolution in which the political power of the nobility, especially that of the gentry, grew considerably; the demesne lands of the lords disproportionately increased at the expense of the serfs’ rustical lands; the lords’ seigneurial jurisdiction over their peasants increased; and the lords’ management of their economy shifted from receiving rents to producing for markets. It was a system of social stagnation in which the evolution of cities

this period,⁴⁹ we often come across approving sentences about the “Prussian way,” and Szabó even uses the term *oncen* in a positive context. At the same time, many studies in these volumes challenged this theory, such as those by István Orosz about market towns in Tokaj-Hegyalja⁵⁰ and by Gyula Varga on a village-community of free peasants in Kismarja.⁵¹

Among all of these arguments, I consider Szabó’s interpretation of the role of farms in Hungarian socio-economic history decisive, on which he had already published a significant study in 1929,⁵² then returned to the issue again in the 1960s on several occasions.⁵³ Szabó regarded farming as an alternative to free-peasant development, which was a major challenge to the “Prussian way” alternative, and for him epitomized an alternative to the “American way” of development.

and an urban middle class, a potential counterbalance to the nobility, was made impossible, and the serfs had no way out of their degrading environment and status. These conditions developed rapidly after the suppression of the Dózsa revolt of 1514, the greatest peasant movement of discontent in Hungary. As a result, the peasants were bound to the soil. The national Diet of 1547, however, enacted the serfs’ right of migration, a freedom which was re-enacted several times more.” Király, “Neo-Serfdom in Hungary,” 269. Here, Király refers to orthodox Marxists/Stalinists such as Imre Szántó, and borrows material from them. In the 1950s, Szabó, in a fierce review, disagreed with Imre Szántó’s views and even refuted his numbers. See Vilmos Erős, “A ‘porosz utas’ fejlődés ‘lassú’ változata. Szabó István opponensi véleménye 1955-ből Szántó Imre könyvéről,” *Aetas* 4 (2019). On Béla Király, see Béla Király, “Emlékkönyv,” *Háború és társadalom. War and Society. Guerre et Société. Krieg und Gesellschaft*, ed. Jónás Pál, Peter Pastor, Péter Tóth Pál (Budapest: Századvég 1992).

49 See Szabó, *Agrártörténeti Tanulmányok*.

50 István Orosz, “A hegyaljai mezővárosok társadalma a XVII. században, Különös tekintettel a szőlőbirtok hatásaira,” in *Agrártörténeti Tanulmányok*, ed. István Szabó (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1960), 3–70. On Szabó’s conception of market-towns, see Szabó, *La répartition de la population de Hongrie*, which reinforce that he maintained his position into the 1960s.

51 Gyula Varga, “Kismarja. Egy szabad paraszt közösség a feudalizmus bomlásának korszakában,” *Agrártörténeti Tanulmányok*, ed. István Szabó (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1960), 71–138.

52 István Szabó, “A debreceni tanyarendszer kialakulása,” in *Föld és Ember* 9, no. 5 (1929): 214–244.

53 István Szabó, “Kísérletek az alföldi tanyarendszer megszüntetésére az 1780-as és 1850-es években,” *Agrártörténeti Tanulmányok* ed. István Szabó (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1960), 139–207.

“Third way,” Populists, István Hajnal

How can we then summarize all this and what was the political message of Szabó's view? I have little doubt that in the background of Szabó's previously explained interpretation of Hungary's socio-economic development we can detect a so-called “third way” theory, which can be associated with the “Populist” ideology⁵⁴ and political movement well-known in twentieth century Hungarian history.

A further, more detailed scrutiny of the notions of this “third way” concept (or indeed, even an elaboration on its focal ideas) is beyond the scope and of this article, but it can be established that the theory included a certain geographical argument,⁵⁵ according to which there are many common features between Czech-Polish and Hungarian socio-economic development throughout history, thereby Hungary constitutes an autonomous region in Europe, located between East and West. Besides, the “third way” offers a political and cultural/socio-political alternative to the contrasting West-East binary as well, positing itself as a *transitional form* located mainly between capitalism and socialism,⁵⁶ but also between individualistic and collectivist principles, between liberalism and the omnipotence of the state-power (totalitarianism) [in 1943, László Németh even considered the idea as a potential alternative between German and Soviet orientations/approaches⁵⁷], e. g. between the autonomous system of farms and the cooperatives, and in a special case, between physical and intellectual work.⁵⁸ It is crucial to point out that after 1945, the most important and best known representative of this idea was István Bibó,⁵⁹ and via his influence, it also served as a theoretical/ideological background for the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.⁶⁰ The previously sketched out views of István Szabó (shared by his many of his colleagues and students), that is his efforts to distance Hungarian historical development from the

54 For the “Third Way” theory in Hungary, see Borbándi, *Der ungarische Populismus*; Konrád Salamon, *A harmadik út küzdelme: Népi mozgalom 1944–1987* (Budapest: Korona, 2002). In Europe, see Gérard Raullet, ed. *Historismus, Sonderweg und dritte Wege* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001).

55 See “Kell-e nekünk Közép-Európa?” *Századvég*, Special issue (1989); Éva Ring, ed. *Helyünk Európában. Nézetek és koncepciók a 20. századi Magyarországon I–II* (Budapest: Magvető, 1986).

56 Gábor Kovács, “Harmadik utas magyar gondolkodók,” *Liget*, 15, no. 8 (2002): 64–75.

57 See Gyula Juhász, *Uralkodó eszmék Magyarországon 1939–1944* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1983).

58 Zoltán Dénes Iván, *Eltorzult magyar alkat: Bibó István vitája Németh Lászlóval és Szekfű Gyulával* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999).

59 Tibor Huszár, “Bibó István—a gondolkodó, a politikus,” *Válogatott tanulmányok, I–III*, ed. István Bibó (Budapest: Magvető, 1986), 385–534.

60 See Péter Kende, ed., *Bibó Nyugatról—éltében, holtában. Külhoni magyarok írásai Bibó Istvánról* (Bern: Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1989).

Eastern European alternative, therefore represented a harsh protest against the Soviet system, Stalinism, and totalitarian dictatorship.⁶¹

To this point of view, the relevance of István Szabó's—essentially third-way—position can be connected via the following statement: although the concept of the “third way” may not be accepted as an alternative way of overcoming the contemporary political, socio-cultural, etc. difficulties, in the 1950s, and 1960s (and even the 1970s), it conveyed a positive message. Namely, by offering itself as a kind of “counter-history” and historical position, the “third way” hindered the total “Gleichschaltung” (homogenization)⁶² of the Hungarian historical profession, and its total subjugation by state power, as it kept aspects of social (and also not rarely those of “professional”⁶³) history on the agenda, and it found connections with modern Western European historical schools (such as the “Annales”)⁶⁴ much more easily than the reigning Marxist-Stalinist historiography. It was not by chance that the institution which in many respects epitomized the efforts to catch up with Western-European tendencies (that is the “István Hajnal-Circle,”) was also built on this tradition that prevailed between the two World Wars in Hungary. This was apparent even in the choice of its name: István Hajnal,⁶⁵ who was, after all, one of the main conceptual allies of István Szabó, even after 1945.

- 61 Tibor Filep, *A politikai rendőrség Hajdú-Biharban 1957–1989. III/III* (Debrecen: 2011). According to the sources in this volume, a secret Communist Party agent labelled the so-called “István Szabó School” as counter-revolutionary, even in the 1970s. See pages 313. 139. 485.
- 62 Romsics “A magyar történetírás gleichschaltolása, 1945–1949,” [Részletek] *Rubicon* 26, no. 5 (2011): 9–11.
- 63 For reprofessionalization see Romsics, *Clio bővületében*, 397–422; Vilmos Erős, *Modern historiográfia—Az újkori történetírás egy története* [Modern Historiography. A History of Modern Historical Writing] (Budapest: Ráció, 2015), 374–375.
- 64 On the “Annales” school in Hungary, see Gábor Klaniczay, “Georges Duby et les Annales en Hongrie,” *Rencontres Intellectuelles franco-hongroises*, ed. Péter Sahin-Tóth (Budapest: Collegium Budapest, 2001), 106–117.
- 65 See László Lakatos, *Az élet és a formák. Hajnal István történelemszociológiája* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 1996). Jenő Szűcs, who many historians hold to be the greatest figure in Hungarian historiography after 1945, had a view similar to Szabó's “third way.” It was not by chance that he had also been marginalized during the Communist era. At the same time, it should be added that Szűcs developed his insights on Hungarian society in the Middle Ages; in the 1980s, Péter Hanák extended Szűcs's theory to apply to the nineteenth century as well. See Jenő Szűcs, “The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An outline,” *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 29, no. 2–4 (1983). For Hanák, see Romsics, *Clio bővületében*, 582–583. It should be added that the so-called “Volksgeschichte,” in the vein of Elemér Mályusz (historian István Hajnal's closest ally and friend)—which had decisive influence on István Szabó in the first stages of his career, did not share the ‘populist’ conception of the “third road,” and instead reflected the “cultural superiority” ideology, preferred by the official administrations in Hungary between the two World Wars. For Mályusz's “Volksgeschichte,” see Elemér Mályusz, “Visszaemlékezések,” *Recollections*, ed. István Soós (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont/Történelmi Intézet, 2021), 251–343.

Sources

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Vilmos Erős is Associate Professor at Institute of History at the University of Debrecen, where he teaches Hungarian and European historiography, Theory of History and History of Political Ideas. Most recently, he published a general historiographical synthesis (2015, in Hungarian) and is now working on a compendium of Hungarian historical writing (in English).