

Medieval Saints and Martyrs as Communist Villains and Heroes: National Days in Czechoslovakia and Hungary during Communism

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformation of medieval figures from state “heroes” during the interwar years into “villains” of the Communist state in Czechoslovakia (St Wenceslas and Jan Hus) and Hungary (St Stephen) through their national day commemorations. I argue that the negative treatment of these medieval heroes was not clear-cut and, especially in Hungary, they enjoyed a comeback of sorts during the second half of the Communist era. This article thus demonstrates, through official commemorative events, that the Communist regimes of Czechoslovakia and Hungary to some extent were ready to continue with national symbols and traditions that were firmly established in the previous era and had apparently been abolished by the Communist regimes themselves.

Keywords: National days; Communism; Czechoslovakia; Hungary; medieval figures

1. Introduction

Although they purport to reflect a nation’s historical truth, national historical narratives are not constant, but always developing and being reworked in order to represent current political and cultural needs. In particular, the historical heroes of one era may be portrayed as villains in the next. In this article, I trace the Communist fate of the national days of St Stephen in Hungary, and St Wenceslas and Jan Hus in Czechoslovakia.¹ From heroes during

¹ Although I refer to Czechoslovakia throughout the article, the discussion pertains to the Czech part of the People’s Republic.

the interwar period, these medieval figures were transformed mainly into villains and their national days abolished, to be replaced by a Soviet-influenced national day calendar. Yet, as I shall show, the Communist relationship to these historical figures and the threads of history they represented was more complex.

Once the Communist parties in East Central Europe were firmly established after 1948, they proceeded to cement their legitimacy by attempting to embed their place within the national historical narrative. One way in which they attempted to achieve this was through the appropriation and adaptation of the national day calendars. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, I explore how the Communist regimes of Hungary and Czechoslovakia dealt with the question of these medieval saints and martyrs who, especially since the 19th century, had played a crucial role in the historical narrative by providing the nation with a starting point for its existence in the long distant past. Secondly, I demonstrate how, although there was an initial ambiguity towards these medieval figures, who were expelled from the national day calendar, the socialist system adapted and finessed its attitude to them throughout its 40-year existence. The Communist regimes found that they could not completely stamp out the memories of these figures. Moreover, as the regimes themselves began to change and attempted to respond to political developments, they began to open up to the possible “return” of these medieval saints.

National day commemorations were (as in the interwar period) an important part of the Communist effort to gain legitimacy as they offered a vehicle through which the new historical narrative could be easily transmitted. Furthermore, as mass events, they externalised in physical form the concept of the “people” and the Communist governments as the expression of the will of the people. National days turn the citizens of a country into a collective whole and a community for the purposes of national commemoration. This was done not only on the day of the actual commemoration, but also in the days leading up to it: flyers and posters adorned streets, newspaper articles were published extolling the importance of the day and informing the public of the commemorative programme. After the day, newspapers again reported on the occasion.

Of course, adapting national day calendars and historical narratives during times of rapid social, political and economic change was not new.² In 1918, when Czechoslovakia and Hungary became independent nation-states, they also established their own national day calendars with the aim of legitimising the new state: medieval saints and martyrs, the new state heroes (not the Habsburg Emperor), were chosen for commemoration to showcase the nation’s historical longevity.³ In Hungary, the selection of heroes was simple:

² A classic example of this is: Ozouf 1988.

³ The turn towards medieval figures began in the 19th century when scholars became interested in representations of historical continuity. See: Baár 2010: 136.

St Stephen, Hungary's medieval founder, was commemorated on August 20, St Stephen's Day, also known as Foundation of State Day.⁴ In Czechoslovakia, the process was less straightforward, given the social cleavages around both ethnic (Czech-Slovak, Czech-German or Slovak-Hungarian) and religious lines (Catholics-Protestants), and a comprehensive national day law was not passed until 1925.⁵ Eventually, the legendary figure of St Wenceslas and the 15th-century Protestant martyr Jan Hus were selected for commemoration on September 28 and July 6 respectively.⁶

During the Second World War – with Czechoslovakia now divided into an occupied Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and an ostensibly independent Slovak Republic – the Germans also attempted to co-opt local national days.⁷ In the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the figure of St Wenceslas provided an opportunity to cement the narrative of a historical German-Czech cooperation, and St Wenceslas Day was an ideal vehicle through which to promote this. In the Nazi German discourse, St Wenceslas had brought the Czechs into the western cultural sphere by adopting Christianity and making peace with his powerful German neighbour.⁸ Hence, the Czechs today should also willingly make peace and collaborate with Germany.

Hungary more consciously aligned itself with Germany during the Second World War, as “Hitler's reluctant satellite”, in order to regain the lands lost with the 1921 Treaty of Trianon.⁹ The reacquisition of the “lost” territories of the Holy Crown of St Stephen was reflected in national day commemorations during the war. The official programme booklet for the August 20 commemoration in 1939 declared: “The proud capital of enlarged Hungary — in the first year of the return — in 1939 celebrates the founder of Hungary, our first holy king, St Stephen's memory with special pomp.”¹⁰ To visually mark the occasion, the traditional fireworks show was supplemented by a display of lights.¹¹ First the image displayed was of “truncated Hungary”, but the next set of lights formed the outline of “enlarged Hungary”.

⁴ For the interwar treatment of St Stephen see: Klimó 2003: 244-288.

⁵ For the law see: “65/1925” in *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení státu československého* [The Official Gazette of the Czechoslovak State], 1925: 433-434. For the debate surrounding the national day law see: Paces 2009: 116-120.

⁶ SS Cyril and Methodius were also added to the national day law, but these figures were mainly commemorated in Slovakia.

⁷ Rothschild 2000: 32-33.

⁸ See, for example: “Sv. Václav, patron české země” [St Wenceslas, patron of the Bohemian lands] in *Národní listy* [The National Newspaper], 28 September 1940: 1.

⁹ Kontler 2002: 364.

¹⁰ *Szent István-hét Budapesten 1939. évben* [The St Stephen week in Budapest in the year 1939] 1939: 1.

¹¹ “Húsz év óta először vettek részt az ünnepségen a Felvidék és Kárpátalja lakói” [For the first time in twenty years the inhabitants of Southern Slovakia and Subcarpathia took part in the celebration] in *Pesti Hírlap* [The Pest Newspaper], 22 August 1939: 4.

The establishment of the Communist regimes in Czechoslovakia and Hungary after the war marked another dramatic shift in the national historical narrative, which now laid stress on the revolutionary tradition of the people of the Eastern bloc and their liberation by the Red Army. The historical longevity of the nation was no longer of central importance. Medieval saints and what they represented – the foundation of the state or a golden age – had little role in this new narrative and, besides, they represented a bourgeois view of history that was to be rejected.¹² Accompanying this was the Communist national day calendar. While many Soviet-themed national days were introduced – such as liberation days, May Day parades, and commemorations of the Great October Socialist Revolution – the countries of the Eastern bloc still attempted to keep their distinct identities. An analysis of national holidays throughout the 40 years of Communist rule in East Central Europe demonstrates that the Communist regimes were not static entities, but they responded and adapted to changes within society.¹³

2. Jan Hus, St Wenceslas and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia

With the end of the Second World War, on May 9 1945, Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia were again reunited to form the Czechoslovak Republic. The Czechoslovak Communists, who enjoyed great popularity in Czechoslovakia, started to reformulate “the Czech national self-understanding into a Slavic and socialist mould,” enabling the Party to present itself as the next logical step for Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ The Communist Party was “reinventing” and “refashioning” itself “as a patriotic, at times even nationalist, party.” This new patriotism also involved a new historical narrative, in which, at least in the immediate post-war years, the 15th-century reformist preacher Jan Hus was presented as the “first modern *revolutionary*”.¹⁵ The figure of St Wenceslas could not fit into this revolutionary tradition, and he was side-lined in the new national narrative and erased from the national day calendar of the People’s Republic.

The new Czechoslovak national day law of November 1951 represented a complete and radical overhaul.¹⁶ The calendar introduced new, Soviet-inspired national days such as Liberation Day (9 May) or the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, although it also maintained some familiar dates. These included October 28, which no longer referred to the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, but instead commemorated Nationalisation Day,

¹² On the new, Communist historical narrative, see: Apor, 2014: 9-16; Górný, 2003; or Kolář, 2010.

¹³ A good example of this is: Apor 2014.

¹⁴ Abrams 2004: 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 100.

¹⁶ “93/1951” in *Sbírka zákonů republiky Československé* [The Official Gazette of the Republic of Czechoslovakia], 1951: 250-251.

and July 6, Jan Hus Day. The law also established a new hierarchy among the Czechoslovak national holidays: state holiday (*státní svátek*), significant days (*významné dny*) and memorable days (*památné dny*). Jan Hus Day, previously a holiday, was now relegated to Memorial Day status, as was SS Cyril and Methodius Day, meaning they were still working days.

One conspicuous absence from the Communist national day calendar was St Wenceslas. Whilst some suggest that St Wenceslas was abandoned by the Communists because of his appropriation by the officials of the Protectorate, I believe this was only part of the reason.¹⁷ More important was Wenceslas' religious aspect and the fact that, as we will see with St Stephen in Hungary, it was impossible to fit him into the revolutionary narrative the Communists were attempting to establish in the early 1950s. In announcing the national day law to the Assembly, Dr Zdeněk Vácha, an Assembly member, did not specifically elaborate on St Wenceslas (or his omission), although he did observe that national holidays were "always and everywhere an expression and external indicator of the sentiments of the ruling class of the state and an expression towards the world about the nature of the system."¹⁸ It is no surprise, therefore, that when the Catholic Church was in power, Vácha continued, they made sure that national holidays coincided with religious holidays. As such, the Communists deliberately omitted St Wenceslas, as he represented the old ruling class whom they had overthrown. SS Cyril and Methodius were only retained in order to placate the Slovaks, and they could be reconfigured to represent the concept of Pan-Slavism.

Although there was a continuation of old traditions in the new national day calendar – such as Jan Hus Day, SS Cyril and Methodius Day and October 28 – the narratives in which these dates were couched had undergone a radical transformation. This may be partly due to the influence of Zdeněk Nejedlý, the chief Party ideologist and president of the newly established Czech Academy of Sciences, under whom, as Maciej Górny argues, "the new Communist interpretation of national culture (...) became much closer to Palacký's or Masaryk's ideas than it was before 1929."¹⁹ Once in power, the Communists perhaps felt that in order to maintain public acquiescence, they could not diverge too greatly from the traditions to which the people had become emotionally attached, and similarly maintained Christmas and Easter.

Nonetheless, the narrative changes were too radical to be able to overlook the significant discontinuities. Górny underlines the continuity of traditions

¹⁷ See for example: Rychlík 2008: 200.

¹⁸ "59. schůze, Pátek, 2. listopadu 1951, Zpráva výboru ústavně-právního k vládnímu návrhu zákona o státním svátku, o dnech pracovního klidu a o památných a významných dnech (tisk 589)" [Session 59 on Friday, 2 November 1951, Report of the Legal and Constitutional Committee on the government bill on state holiday, public holidays and memorable and significant days] at <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1948ns/stenprot/059schuz/s059006.htm> [accessed 10 April 2014].

¹⁹ Górny 2003: 103-114, especially 108-109.

through the example of the Communist adoption of Hus and the Hussite movement. For František Palacký – the 19th-century historian who shaped the Czech national historical narrative – as well as for the Communists, “the Hussite movement is essential as the central, most splendid and important tradition of national history.”²⁰ Even so, the discourse around Hus and the Hussites in the interwar period, after the establishment of Czechoslovakia, focused on Hus’s era as the “golden age”, whereas in Communist historiography, Hus became a fighter against “feudal oppression”, against the Church, and a revolutionary.²¹ Moreover, to embed the Hussites and Hus even deeper into the revolutionary tradition that underpinned the Communist narrative, the Communists also placed the radical Tábórite (extreme puritanical followers of Hus) General Jan Žižka in the forefront.²² Therefore, while there was a (seeming) continuation of national traditions, the narrative structure that accompanied these traditions shifted radically.

2.1. St Wenceslas and the Communists

In the interwar period, the Czechoslovak Communist Party became even more hostile to St Wenceslas than it was to be after 1948. This may have been because, although St Wenceslas’ Day was celebrated in the period 1918-1938, there was still much ambiguity towards this Catholic figure in wider society. By opposing Wenceslas, the Communist Party – which was popular in interwar Czechoslovakia, gaining second place in the 1925 parliamentary elections – could also express its opposition to the then bourgeois ruling class. This aversion to St Wenceslas was particularly well-illustrated by the articles that appeared in the Communist daily *Rudé právo* in the build-up to the 1929 St Wenceslas millennium, marking the 1000-year anniversary of the saint’s murder by supporters of his pagan brother, Boleslav. One article, generously peppered with the word “fascist”, declared that the saint’s commemoration unites “the bourgeoisie with the clerical reaction and supports social-fascism as a manifestation for clericalism, fascism and preparing for war.”²³

Another article, entitled “St Wenceslas tribute: clerical reaction, fascism and militarism”, elaborates on why the workers must protest on September 28. The main event was to take place on the eve of St Wenceslas’ Day, in front of the St Wenceslas statue on Wenceslas Square and was to be attended by “all the official representatives of the Czechoslovak bourgeoisie.”²⁴ Its purpose, the

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 112.

²¹ See for example: Graus 1958: 176.

²² For a discussion on continuities and ruptures in Czechoslovak Communist historiography see also: Kolář, 2010: 319-340.

²³ “Svatováclavské oslavy” [St Wenceslas celebrations] in *Rudé právo* [The Red Right], 26 September 1929: 2.

²⁴ “Svatováclavský hold — klerikální reakci, fašismu a militarismu” [St Wenceslas tribute – clerical reaction, fascism and militarism] in *Rudé právo*, 26 September 1929: 2.

Communists argued, was so that the workers could “worship their exploiters, it is a tribute to clerical reaction, fascism and militarism”. The September 28 headline announced: “Against dictatorial fascism and social fascism”.²⁵ Most of this article was, however, edited by the censors, presumably to confirm just how much the bourgeoisie oppressed the proletariat. At the bottom of the front page we can still read: “Workers! Demonstrate against the clerical-fascistic St Wenceslas parade!” *Dělnická Besídka*, the literary supplement of *Rudé právo*, also poked fun at Wenceslas, depicting him seated on a donkey with the Habsburg eagle looking on.²⁶

Yet Wenceslas was still useful for Communist historiography in that he could “prove” the longevity of a Czechoslovak state. A fruitful source for examining this changing historical narrative under the Communists is the *Přehled Československých Dějin (Outline of Czechoslovak History)*. The *Outline* was intended as a monumental work of prescriptive history, a collective effort by the newly established Czechoslovak Historical Institute of the Academy of Sciences. It consisted of three volumes which appeared between 1958 and 1960, but as a result of the lengthy preparations and the changing political climate of the second half of the 1950s, they were already outdated by the time they were published.²⁷ Nonetheless, the *Outline* shaped Marxist historical writing throughout the Communist era in Czechoslovakia and is thus a fruitful resource to gain an understanding of how the Czechoslovak Communists perceived and reinterpreted national history.

In the *Outline*, St Wenceslas was further removed from any kind of revolutionary tradition, although he and the other Přemyslid kings were said to be the rulers of a territory that had all the attributes of a state.²⁸ Wenceslas’ religious activities were condemned: “It seems certain that Wenceslas made every effort to support the penetration and anchoring of Christianity in the country and helped to consolidate feudal ideology and religious domination.” The authors acknowledged that Wenceslas had been glorified since the 10th century as “a kind of national saint — a saint of feudal lords”, yet he also united the nation in the “old times”. He no longer performed this function, however, since in the 19th and 20th centuries, the uses of his figure and symbol had become even more reactionary. Thus, the patron saint of the Czech lands no longer fulfilled his role and was effectively replaced on a symbolic level by Jan Hus, who fought against “feudal oppression”.²⁹

Despite the animosity towards the figure of St Wenceslas, in the late 1940s and early 1950s the Czechoslovak People’s Party’s daily, *Lidová demokracie*, would publish articles on the saint on the September 28 anniversary. From

²⁵ “Proti diktatuře fašismu a sociálfášismu” [Against the dictatorship of fascism and social fascism] in *Rudé právo*, 28 September 1929: 1.

²⁶ *Dělnická Besídka* [Workers’ Feuilleton], 15 September 1929: 1.

²⁷ Kolář 2010: 319-340, especially 328.

²⁸ Graus 1958: 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 176.

1945-1948, the People's Party continued to present itself "as a Czech nationalist, Christian, social-reformist and anti-communist party", as it had been in the interwar period, but this state of affairs was not permitted for long.³⁰ After the Communist takeover following Victorious February in 1948, the People's Party was no longer independent, but part of the Communist Party system. Even so, they were allowed to keep their newspaper, *Lidová demokracie*, which aimed to distinguish the different Catholic traditions of the Czechs and the Slovaks, drawing a link between SS Cyril and Methodius (commemorated mainly in Slovakia). The paper also attempted to cleanse the St Wenceslas tradition of its Nazi associations. The link between SS Cyril and Methodius and St Wenceslas was tangential: St Wenceslas was represented as the follower of the religious and political traditions that the Byzantine Greek brothers established. Even so, St Wenceslas did not only follow these traditions, but "also applied them against the Germans, who sought to subdue the Slavs", according to an article from September 18, 1949.³¹ The connection between SS Cyril and Methodius, on the one hand, and St Wenceslas on the other, further underlined the unity between the Czech and Slovak parts of the People's Republic. Showing that he did not make a pact with the Germans, but applied the traditions inherited from SS Cyril and Methodius to stop a German invasion, further distanced him from the rhetoric of the Protectorate officials.³²

St Wenceslas, the article further argued, was also present throughout Czechoslovak history: in 1918 it was in front of his statue, in Prague's Wenceslas Square, that independence was declared, and in 1945, when the Nazi army capitulated, the tanks of the Red Army liberating Prague filed past the equestrian statue of the saint. Thus, not only did they liberate Prague, but also St Wenceslas. The paper also hoped that now peaceful cooperation was possible, and that St Wenceslas' legacy would once again be strong.³³ Yet by the early 1950s, when the Communist national historiography became more definitive, such articles petered out.

2.2. Hus, the First Revolutionary Hero of the 1950s

In the Czech Communist historical narrative, as it originally developed in the 19th century, Jan Hus was represented in heroic terms, while Wenceslas was sidelined. Hus is seen as having fought against everything St Wenceslas stood for: feudalism, the kingdom and the Church. Hus and the Hussite

³⁰ Brenner 2004: 173.

³¹ "Ve šlépějích sv. Václava" [In the footsteps of St Wenceslas] in *Lidová demokracie* [People's Democracy], 18 September 1949: 1-2.

³² For distancing St Wenceslas from the Protectorate rhetoric see: "Katolická akce uctila svatého Václava" [The Catholic Action honoured St Wenceslas] in *Lidová demokracie*, 28 September 1949: 2.

³³ "Svatý Václav – světec a člověk" [St Wenceslas – saint and man] in *Lidová demokracie*, 28 September 1950: 4.

movement were not interpreted in the context of religion or the Reformation, but as among the first true revolutionaries. It is not surprising, then, that the Czechoslovak Communists presented themselves as the heirs of the Hussite tradition and the only true followers of their legacy.

The connection between Hus, the Hussite movement and Communism goes back to the 19th century, when allegedly even Engels noted “in a letter in the year 1856 the fact that all the true Czech revolutionary movements will always signal back to the Hussite movement.” Or so the Communist daily, *Rudé právo*, reported in 1951.³⁴ A more direct link between the Bohemian socialists of the 19th century, the Hussites and a Czech-Socialist historical narrative was posited by Karl Kautsky. Kautsky, a Marxist theorist, was born in Prague into a German-speaking family. In his *Die Vorläufer der Neueren Sozialismus* of 1895, he made extensive use of František Palacký’s seminal history of the Bohemian Lands. Kautsky went even further than Palacký and argued that the Hussite period, especially the Tábórites – the radical faction of the Hussite movement led by General Jan Žižka – stood for a milder form of Communism and for democracy.³⁵

At first, then, it seemed that Hus was to continue his traditional role within Czech national historiography under the Communist regime. Indeed, the inclusion of Hus and the Hussite movement in the official Communist historiography was developed mainly by Zdeněk Nejedlý, an academic who became Minister of Education in the first Communist government. In 1946 Nejedlý published *Komunisté: Dědici Velikých Tradic Českého Národa* (*Communists: The Heirs of the Great Traditions of the Czech Nation*), in which he linked the Hussite movement and the Czechoslovak Communists. Nejedlý argued that during the Middle Ages, the nobility were not the bearers of national tradition, as they were all foreigners, or if they had Czech names, they Germanised them.³⁶ The Hussite revolution was a revolution of the people and, although it ended in defeat,

Hussitism survived forever in the memory of the nation and also survived in another layer – in the farmers and in the cities (...) – amongst the plebeian stratum, that is, small artisans and journeymen serving the lower urban classes.³⁷

In this interpretation, then, the people – and not the ruling classes – were the true heirs of the Hussite movement; the Czechoslovak Communist Party represents the people, thus the Party is the true heir of the Hussite traditions. In Nejedlý’s mind, Hus would be an active Party supporter: “Today, Hus would be the head of a political party and his grandstand would not be the

³⁴ “Mistr Jan Hus – Bojovník za pravdu lidu” [Master Jan Hus – fighter for people’s rights] in *Rudé právo* 6 July 1951: 3.

³⁵ Morée 2007: 286-288.

³⁶ Nejedlý 1946: 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 8-9.

pulpit, but Prague's Lucerna or Wenceslas Square. And very close to his side – we are convinced of this – would be us, the Communists.”³⁸

Hus had been placed at the centre of the Czech historical narrative by František Palacký, the 19th-century historian and “father of the nation”. In his *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě* (*History of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia*), Palacký wrote that the Hussites represented a golden era, which was the middle ages of Czech history:

The middle ages is marked by the religious skirmishes that entered Czech public life with the start of Hussitism in 1403 and ended with the expulsion of all Utraquists from the country in 1627. In that age, our nation reached the zenith of its historical importance.³⁹

Palacký's model of Czech history, with Hussitism as its zenith, became a constant presence in Czech historiography and fed into ideas of the state even before the Communist period. It was adopted by the President of the First Republic Tomáš G. Masaryk, who was a great supporter of Hus, as was evident during the commemorations of Jan Hus during the First Republic. Even so, Masaryk had also promoted the establishment of St Wenceslas Day – although less out of admiration for the Catholic saint and more out of the need to promote the 1000-year origins of a Bohemian state. Nejedlý also referenced Palacký extensively, arguing that Palacký not only placed the Hussite tradition in the forefront, but also “taught people (...) to greatly honour those traditions, [and] to obey them in the present and in the future.”⁴⁰ Although some scholars argue that there is a direct continuity of the Hus cult from the First Republic to the Communist era, I believe that the difference in the discourse is also significant.⁴¹ During the First Republic, Hus was presented as anti-German and a Protestant religious reformer, signifying a break with Austrian/Habsburg rule and the Catholic Church (despite the majority of the population being Catholic). In the new Communist narrative, the religious element was downplayed and Hus was represented as a revolutionary and the champion of the people. The Communists themselves attempted to differentiate their narrative from the previous ones, although maintaining the anti-German element, which would be even more pertinent after the experiences of the war. Indeed, Nejedlý claimed that the first time the Czech people had been “true to their national traditions” was on July 6 1939 – Jan Hus Day – when 30-40,000 people gathered around the Jan Hus statue in the Old Town Square to protest the German invasion of Czechoslovakia.⁴²

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 22.

³⁹ Palacký 2007: 56.

⁴⁰ Nejedlý 1946: 13.

⁴¹ For the argument of continuity in the Hussite narrative see: Górný 2003: 108-109 and Morée 2007: 295-296.

⁴² Nejedlý 1946: 30. See also Brandes 1969: 82.

We might expect, then, that Jan Hus Day – although now only a “memorial day” – would have been an important marker in the national day calendar and, indeed, at first it was. In the late 1940s until the mid-1950s, the Communist daily *Rudé právo*, now the official state newspaper, published feature articles on Hus around every July 6, the day of his commemoration. The articles would call “all constituents of the National Front, Churches and public corporations to attend the celebrations in large numbers”, report on the commemorative events, emphasise Hus’s importance and praise the Soviet Union for enabling the Czechs to follow their true national traditions.⁴³ This Soviet aspect was at the core of the speech of Ludvík Svoboda, deputy Prime Minister and army general, during the commemorative events of 1950. Svoboda claimed that “it seems almost obvious that the celebration of Hus became a great national celebration, and that it is the traditional manifestation of our working people.”⁴⁴ He effectively dismissed the celebrations of Hus during the First Republic as fake and untruthful, stating that the ability of the Czechs to commemorate Hus was due to “the valour of the Soviet people, whose glorious and victorious army liberated us from German fascism and we owe it to the great teacher of our nation, General Stalin.”⁴⁵

It was not just in the print media that the official Hus cult was celebrated during Communism, but also on the big screen, with the Hussite Revolutionary Trilogy of the 1950s. This was a series of three films directed by Otakar Vávra: *Jan Hus* in 1954; *Jan Žižka* in 1955; and *Proti všem* (Against All Odds) in 1957.⁴⁶ Although these films were not directly related to Jan Hus Day, there is one interesting aspect to their casts: both Jan Hus and Jan Žižka (in the second and third films) were played by the actor Zdeněk Štěpánek. It was Štěpánek who in 1929 had played the title role in the film *Svatý Václav* (St Wenceslas), produced for the 1929 St Wenceslas millennium commemorations. This thread running between the films in the form of Štěpánek shows how fragile the narratives and practices introduced by the Communists were and how, beneath the surface, there were many continuities and also links that the Communists would reject. It also reminds us that the state itself, be it the “bourgeois” First Republic or the Communist regime, took a particular interest in promoting the image of its chosen historical heroes.

Yet although Hus fitted in so perfectly with Communist discourse, by the late 1950s the newspaper reports of his memorial day on July 6 became increasingly sporadic, and by the 1960s almost disappeared. It is not clear why this is so, although the absence of newspaper reports must also represent a

⁴³ “Oslavy svátku M. J. Husi na Staroměstském náměstí” [Celebration of M. J. Hus on Old Town Square] in *Rudé právo* 1 July 1949: 3

⁴⁴ “Národní pout’ v Husinci na paměť Mistra Jana Husi” [National pilgrimage in Husinec for the remembrance of Master Jan Hus] in *Rudé právo*, 5 July 1950: 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ For more on these films see: Čornej 1995.

decline in the significance of his memorial day. One possible reason for this is that with the process of de-Stalinisation from 1956, personality cults were frowned upon, and thus the Hus cult could not be sustained in such an environment.

Even so, both Hus and St Wenceslas retained significance in popular memory as symbols of the collective body within the public space, as epitomised by their national holidays, and this created opportunities for rare public protest. This was especially evident during the events of the Prague Spring in 1968. On August 21, the day the Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia, both the Jan Hus monument in Old Town Square and the St Wenceslas statue on St Wenceslas Square were used as gathering places to protest the invasion.⁴⁷ By the 1970s, the space around the St Wenceslas statue had become such a popular protest site that the Communists erected a metal fence around it, in the shape of linden leaves, still standing today.⁴⁸

3. King Stephen vs Constitution Day

For the Hungarian Communists, more underhand ways were needed for them to come to power than in Czechoslovakia. Following the end of the Second World War, communist propaganda in Hungary was strengthened throughout 1946 and 1947. The Communists, by weakening all the other opposition parties and through their infamous salami tactics, managed to force through a number of different laws, for example the one regarding nationalisation. By the 1949 elections, the Hungarian Workers' Party – as the Communists were known after their forcible merger with the Social Democrats – held all power. Whilst a number of different parties were listed on the ballots, they all ran under the same programme, the programme of the Communists. After the elections, the Communists cemented their power by passing a new Constitution in the National Assembly on August 18, 1949, which took effect on August 20, thus signalling a new state foundation that, although on St Stephen's Day, did not include Stephen. Constitution Day, as August 20 was to be known, was enshrined in law a year later:

The Constitution expresses and ascertains the result of those fundamental economic and societal changes that have been achieved by our nation since its liberation by the armed forces of the great Soviet Union, and the Constitution also designates the way forward for our future development on our way to socialism. Therefore 20 August is a historical turning point in the life of the working people of Hungary.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Paces 2009: 212.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 213.

⁴⁹ "1950/I." in *I. Törvények, Törvényerejű Rendeletek és Minisztertanácsi Rendeletek 1950* [I. Laws, legislative decrees and decrees by the Council of Ministers], 1951: 43.

Thus, all allusions to St Stephen and the 1000-year old Hungarian state he founded were eliminated from the commemorative narrative. The new Constitution was not only the celebration of the present and the future, but also the past, argued the Communist daily *Szabad Nép* on its front page on the day the Constitution officially took effect.⁵⁰ The only covert reference to St Stephen or the 1000-year foundation of the Hungarian state was that after the “old taking of the homeland [*honfoglalás*] (...) the lords sold the homeland and the country to our enemies of hundreds of years”. The climax of selling out the homeland came during the Second World War, when “even the existence of our nation was in danger”. This trend, however, is not over and the new Constitution is the symbol of a new beginning, a “new taking of the homeland”.

Renaming August 20 and replacing St Stephen with the Stalinist Constitution meant that now, instead of the medieval founder of the state, the Hungarian nation looked to the Soviet Union and its liberation of Hungary as the start of a new historical narrative. This was reinforced by the other legislative decrees and laws which were passed to complete the new, Communist national holiday calendar. Indeed, throughout the Eastern bloc, Liberation Days – when the Red Army liberated these countries – were considered among, if not, the most important national day commemorations.⁵¹ Along with Liberation Day, another commemorative day that could not be missing from the calendar was November 7, commemorating the Great October Socialist Revolution.⁵²

Thus, Stephen was erased from the new commemorative calendar and narrative. Yet, in the three to four years following the war, before they had full governmental control, Communist party cadres still attempted to link themselves to the legacy of St Stephen through a historical narrative, primarily through his national holiday. On August 20, 1947, the Communist daily *Szabad Nép* published an article by Erik Molnár (Minister of Welfare, but soon to be appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs and then ambassador to Moscow) in which he praised Stephen as “one of the outstanding vanguards of Hungarian progress”, as the Communists were today.⁵³ Molnár claimed the Communist Party as the “truest depository of the Hungarian historical traditions”, and it is apparent that, in this period at least, the Communist Party considered Stephen as not simply part of these traditions, but he also marked the beginning of a Hungarian historical presence.

These traditions, Molnár stressed, must “be rooted in the whole thousand-year past of the Hungarian nation.” He fixes Stephen into a revolutionary

⁵⁰ “Az Alkotmány Ünnepe” [The feast of the Constitution] in *Szabad Nép* [The Free People] 20 August 1949: 1.

⁵¹ “1950/10.” in *I. Törvények, Törvényerejű Rendeletek és Minisztertanácsi Rendeletek 1950*, 1951: 53.

⁵² “1950/37.” in *Ibid.*: 131.

⁵³ Molnár, Erik “Szent István napjára” [For St Stephen’s Day] in *Szabad Nép*, 20 August 1947: 1.

“people’s” tradition, focusing on his achievements in converting the pagan Hungarians to Christianity, and establishing agriculture and the Catholic Church, which at the time was the agent of culture and champion of the poor. Indeed, St Stephen was “one of the greatest figures of the Hungarian historic past”. Molnár presents the Communists as part of the legacy of this tradition: they were the “party of the Hungarian nation”, because “we consider the historical tasks of today and the whole historic past together, because in our own struggles we continue the struggles of the thousand years.”

By the following year, however, the *Szabad Nép* article on St Stephen’s Day was, however quite critical. Its author, the writer and publicist István Száva, did not overlook Stephen’s achievements, but he also claimed that Stephen “was not a popular ruler” in his day, as he led the Hungarians with a “tight fist.”⁵⁴ Moreover, Stephen did not achieve everything alone, since accomplishments so great cannot be realised by one man only, but was aided by Slav and Italian priests.

The 1948 commemorations also ushered in a new element to the content of the August 20 national holiday, and the start of the separation of August 20 from St Stephen. No longer known as St Stephen’s Day, the Communists renamed it the Day of the New Bread (*új kenyér ünnepe*).⁵⁵ The element of the “new bread” was not a new concept for those living in the countryside, where it had been part of the St Stephen Day harvest festivities since the late 19th century, when it was held by the Ministry of Agriculture to halt the harvest strike.⁵⁶ More recently, Admiral Miklós Horthy, regent of Hungary until 1944, held a Day of the New Hungarian Bread festivities in Szabadka, when the Bácska region was returned to Hungary in 1941.⁵⁷ Although the symbol of the new bread had been used by the right-wing Horthy regime, it was the perfect vehicle for the Communists to showcase themselves as the representatives of the peasantry. It also provided a perfect replacement for the figure of St Stephen while still maintaining a major national holiday on August 20.

The Catholic Church, a major proponent of St Stephen and his cult, also attempted to continue some of the traditions following the war that had been firmly established during the interwar period, such as the Holy Right procession in the capital. Since the Castle District in Buda was in ruins, the first two processions took place in and in front of the St Stephen Basilica in Pest. In 1947, the procession followed a new route, starting from the Basilica, along Andrásy Avenue to Heroes Square. The Catholic Church also organised an anti-Communist demonstration for this day, but the Communist Party had

⁵⁴ Száva, István “Az államalapító király” [The state founder king] in *Szabad Nép*, 20 August 1948: 3.

⁵⁵ Klimó 1999: 52.

⁵⁶ “Szent Istvántól az új kenyérig” [From St Stephen to the new bread] at <http://mult-kor.hu/cikk.php?id=6702&cpIdx=3>, 2012: 3 [accessed 12 August 2014].

⁵⁷ Klimó 1999: 53.

by now taken power and the Catholic Church lost its societal and political influence.⁵⁸

A significant effort was made to embed the new meanings of August 20 in the minds of the Hungarian people and to portray it as a popular celebration of the new Communist constitution. Newspaper reports proclaimed it as the “Feast of the Constitution” and that the “People of the Country celebrated the Anniversary of Our Constitution Happily and Enthusiastically”.⁵⁹ The ritual elements also had to be adapted to the new realities of August 20. Now, instead of a Holy Right procession, the people of Budapest were now to be awakened early: “From seven o’clock in the morning, in different parts of the capital eleven bands, thirty cars with loudspeakers and 112 free-standing loudspeakers will wake up the workers with music”. The day’s festivities ended with a fireworks’ display in the evening, a feature that was carried over from the interwar years.⁶⁰ August 20 was made more rural, with a focus on the harvest and threshing, although as the 1950s progressed, the new bread was mostly dropped from the programme. Instead, the so-called “merry markets” (*vidám vásárok*) were introduced in 1952.⁶¹ These served a double purpose, showcasing the plethora of produce apparently available and also silencing rumours that there was a product shortage.⁶²

The removal of St Stephen from the national day calendar did not, however, mean that he was also removed from the history books. *The History of the Hungarian People: A Short Overview* was published in 1951 and intended for use in secondary schools.⁶³ It covers the history of Hungary from the formation of the Hungarian people in the late 10th century until June 1948, when the Communists gained power (“Building the country of the people”, as the final section is entitled). St Stephen, now referred to as Stephen I (as a king, not a religious figure), was discussed in the context of the beginning of the feudal system.⁶⁴

The *Short Overview* does credit Stephen with a number of achievements: he organised the Hungarian state on the basis of regions/districts, rather than

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 51-52.

⁵⁹ “Alkotmányunk Ünnepe” [The feast of our Constitution] in *Szabad Nép* 20 August 1950: 1 and “Vidáman és Lelkesen Ünnepelte az Ország Népe Alkotmányunk Évfordulóját” [The people of the nation celebrated the anniversary of our Constitution cheerfully and enthusiastically] in *Szabad Nép*, 22 August 1951: 5.

⁶⁰ “Népünnepélyel ünnepli Budapest dolgozó népe az új kenyeret és az alkotmányt” [The working people of Budapest celebrated the new bread and the Constitution with mass celebrations] in *Szabad Nép*, 20 August 1949: 3.

⁶¹ MOL M-KS 276-61/188 (1952).

⁶² An Agitation and Propaganda Department report from 1952 conveyed: “There were many things at the markets, and this had a good effect on the peasants because it demonstrated that the rumours that are being spread by our enemies about the produce shortages are false.” MOL M-KS 276-61/188.

⁶³ Heckenast 1951: 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 19.

on tribal traditions, which were built on blood relations. Stephen also redistributed the lands of the rebels and himself became “the greatest landowner in the country”.⁶⁵ This, however, apparently led to a number of problems, about which the schoolbook is critical. The state, in this way, became a state of “the economically ruling classes”, the large landowners, leading to the establishment of private property.⁶⁶

The *Short Overview* also discussed the introduction of Christianity to the Hungarians, although not in as positive a light as the 1947 and 1946 *Szabad Nép* articles did. In the school textbook, Christianity was represented as a means to ensure that the workers did not rebel against their exploitation by “preaching that the class order and royal power are derived from God.”⁶⁷ The workers’ “humility will be rewarded in the next world, whilst disobedience will be punished on Earth by the ecclesiastical and secular authorities.” The Church had also needed to be sustained, putting great hardship on the workers. Stephen obliged everyone to pay a tithe to the Church and the pagan population was forcibly baptised. Every tenth village had to build a Church, and land, servants and cattle to be given to the priest. Sunday church attendance was compulsory and “those who did not pay attention during the service were punished by being beaten with a twig and shamed by having all their hair cut off.”

By 1951, then, the discourse around Stephen and his achievements had acquired a double-edged meaning. Whilst the Communists acknowledged that his actions were necessary for the survival and progress of the Hungarian people, they censured him for what they claimed was his support of feudalism and the oppressive Catholic Church. As the Communists believed that this new system led to the exploitation of the workers and the beginnings of feudalism, it is no surprise that Stephen was sidelined from the official commemorations. Moreover, in the early 1950s, when the emphasis was on the revolutionary traditions of the Hungarian people and personality cult, Stephen would have proved a difficult fit. Thus, by acknowledging Stephen’s achievements, but at the same time highlighting the negative effects they had on the workers, the Communists created a new narrative around Stephen whereby he could be left out from the official August 20 commemorations, since the new Constitution and Comrade Rákosi could step into Stephen’s shoes as the “great leader”.

3.1. Counting Attendance

The Hungarian Communists were particularly concerned that their national day commemorations be successful, producing reports and statistics on their attendance. It appears, however, that by removing the figure of St Stephen from the August 20 events and turning it into a commemoration of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 21.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 23.

the Communist constitution, it went from being the most popular national day event before the war to a poorly-attended event. A 1957 report by the Agitation and Propaganda Department compared attendance at the May 1st festivities and August 20 celebration in Bács-Kiskun County in southern Hungary, where attendance of August 20 festivities was in decline, especially in the towns.⁶⁸ In Kecskemét, for example, 20,000 people attended the May 1st festivities, but only 8000-9000 people were present at the August 20 events.⁶⁹ The numbers for Kalocsa were 5000 and 400-450 and for Kiskunfélegyháza 12,000 and 600 respectively. This was particularly disappointing given that this was an agricultural area – the merry markets of August 20 were not able to draw the local farming people. The report blames the low turnout on the disorganisation of the local Party, complaining that with some of the “party organisations we cannot get them to understand what it means that August 20 should be prepared and celebrated in the spirit of the popular front.” This decline in August 20 attendance is perhaps the reason why in the 1960s there was a greater push from the Agitation and Propaganda Department for “the spirit of the popular front” and the creation of a “popular mass festival character” with “worker-peasant meetings, harvest celebrations, merry markets, cultural and sporting events nationwide.”⁷⁰

By the 1960s, the efforts to change the meaning of August 20 and to erase St Stephen appear to have been successful, at least on the surface. On the 11th anniversary of the new Constitution, the Agitation and Propaganda Department could report that: “The St Stephen characteristic of 20 August has been completely relegated to the background for the majority of the people.”⁷¹ The report gives the example of the town of Eger, in northern Hungary, where a mass took place in the Basilica at the same time as a political rally was held in the city’s stadium. About 50-60,000 people attended the political rally, whereas the Church mass “was attended by significantly fewer people than in previous years.” Of course, it may not be that Stephen had been “completely relegated to the background for the majority” but that in a climate where he was disapproved of by the regime, the majority felt they could not publicly commemorate him in a church service. The report states that only in one small town in Veszprém County did a speaker at the commemorative Council meeting openly commemorate the memory of Stephen I. In the smaller towns and villages, it was more difficult to blot out his memory: during the commemorations in 1962, the Agitation and Propaganda Department of Heves County in

⁶⁸ MOL M-KS 288-22/2 (1957).

⁶⁹ 1 May celebrations were very popular in Hungary amongst all strata of society. In 1970, 1 May was the most popular national day amongst co-operative members and white-collar workers, and in second place (after 4 April, Liberation Day) among industrial workers and secondary school pupils. See: Gyarmati, 1998: 172.

⁷⁰ MOL M-KS 288-22/1 (1965) and M-KS 288-22/1 (1967).

⁷¹ MOL M-KS 288-22/4 (1960).

northern Hungary reported that in two villages, Kismána and Egercseki, women exiting the church after mass commented that it was the Day of King Stephen.⁷² The fact that the Agitation and Propaganda Department reported this shows the concern of the regime that the loyalties of the people should not lie with the figures of previous eras, but should be focused on Communist symbols and heroes.

Yet an ambiguity towards Stephen always remained and we can observe, after the initial blotting out of his figure, an attempt by the Communist authorities to squeeze Stephen into a Marxist national history narrative. On August 20, 1966, *Népszabadság* published an article – albeit hidden on page 17 – by the historian István Dolmányos entitled “Új vélemények az István-korról” (New opinions on the era of Stephen).⁷³ Dolmányos claimed that historical knowledge is always evolving and we should examine again the role of King Stephen through the lens of the “Marxist writing of history”. Removing the “St” and adding “King” further underlined however how the Communists wanted to add Stephen to their rhetoric. Instead of a religious figure, the focus was on his political and social achievements. Dolmányos argued that the figure of St Stephen had been hijacked in previous eras when “it was not Stephen himself who was in the foreground but the figure of the saint.” The Habsburgs employed this saint figure “to hinder some of the attempts of Hungarian progress.” In contrast, “in the eyes of Marxist science, Stephen was a pioneer of a new, daring social order.” This was restated again in *Népszabadság* on 20 August 1969, where it was argued that Stephen “revolutionised Hungarian society” and was thus an important figure for the Communists, although “first we need to cleanse King Stephen from the mythologising of his figure throughout history.”⁷⁴

This gradual attempt at rehabilitating King Stephen and restoring him to the commemorative calendar became official in 1970. The preparation for the millennial commemoration of King Stephen’s birth was carried out by the Patriotic People’s Front (*Hazafias Népfront*). Established in 1954, it was not until after the 1956 revolution that the Front became an image of national unity.⁷⁵ It functioned as an umbrella organisation for all aspects of the political system, including social and cultural organisations and even the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party.

On 4 May 1970 the Secretariat of the Patriotic People’s Front sent its proposal regarding the “Stephen jubilee” to the Agitation and Propaganda Department.⁷⁶ The proposal concerned the 1000th anniversary of Stephen’s birth

⁷² MOL M-KS 288-22/3 (1962).

⁷³ Dolmányos, István. “Új vélemények az István-korról” [New opinions about the Stephen-era] in *Népszabadság* [People’s Freedom], 20 August 1966: 17.

⁷⁴ Benczédi, László. “Hagyományok: István király” [Traditions: King Stephen] in *Népszabadság*, 20 August 1969: 7.

⁷⁵ Benkő 1995.

⁷⁶ MOL M-KS 288-22/3 (1970).

and the associated events for the years 1970-71. The proposal highlighted that the agreement to jointly commemorate “the 25th anniversary of the liberation of our homeland, the 1000th anniversary of King Stephen’s birth and the 20th anniversary of the formation of the Peace Movement of Priests” had been agreed by the World Federation of Hungarians, the State Office of Church Affairs, the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat of the Patriotic People’s Front and the Interior Secretariat of the Patriotic People’s Front. Stephen had once more come to symbolise the whole Hungarian nation and its political dimension too. As the proposal continued, “the parties agreed that the celebration (...) must be perceived as a complex task and the progress of the Hungarian People’s Republic in the last 25 years must stand in the centre of the commemorations taking place in churches as well.”

The Patriotic People’s Front was also aware that the figure of Stephen was very popular amongst the émigrés, thus next to the Church events there should also be “certain civic commemorations”. There were a number of points that these civic events would need to cover: wreath-laying at King Stephen statues in Buda Castle, in Esztergom and in Székesfehérvár. In Esztergom there was also to be a Church event “and it would be right if the newscasters would also report on the civic commemorations” next to the religious ones. To further underline the Communists’ newfound connection with Stephen, the Budapest Committee of the Patriotic People’s Front prepared to publish a picture magazine in which “in its historic part – in a proper form – there will be a reference to the state founder’s figure and his historical role.” To further reincorporate Stephen into the narrative of the 20 August commemorations in 1970-71 the People’s Front also suggested that at the beginning of the school year, teachers should commemorate Stephen in one of the first history classes.

The millennial celebrations were also supported by a number of new publications. The official publication, *King Stephen I*, recommended by the Front as an aid for those interested in politics and wishing to understand Stephen’s place in the national discourse, was written by historian Antal Bartha.⁷⁷ A slim volume, the first 13 pages give a general history of King Stephen, his activities and era.⁷⁸ Bartha elucidates why Stephen is an important figure for Hungarian history. He acknowledges that Stephen’s aim was to strengthen the feudal system that led to class oppression (the exact analysis that made Stephen a villain in the 1951 *Short Overview*). But Bartha also attempts to defend Stephen, noting that he “was raised in an era of medieval Christian ideas that sanctified feudal class oppression, and these ideals guided his actions.”⁷⁹ Moreover, although Stephen was not a “revolutionary” Bartha notes that “[o]ur history does not only consist of great revolutionaries”, but also of figures “who served

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Bartha 1970.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*: 15.

historical progress”, such as Stephen. Stephen was a ‘[g]reat statesman, whose actions cannot be expunged from our history, from the memory of our people”, as he was the one who “first built the structures of our state”. The Communists and especially János Kádár, First Secretary of the Party, were placed in a direct, historical line with Stephen. Stephen’s achievements, according to Bartha, were not revolutionary, but they represented progress and what the times called for. This was exactly how the Communist Party saw and represented itself: agents of progress and change.

The report by the Patriotic People’s Front proclaimed 20 August 1970 a success. The dual commemoration – the 21st anniversary of the Constitution and the millennium of King Stephen – was observed everywhere.⁸⁰ Around 1.5 million people took part in the day’s events day, with 512,000 participants in Budapest alone: 20 August 1970 was the largest national day so far in the Communist era. Aside from the good organisation of the events, the reason for such a large turnout was, according to the Report, because “20 August – especially amongst the peasantry – is starting to become a tradition, while the commemorations concerning the anniversary of Stephen I attracted large sections of our population.” Despite, therefore, the earlier attempts to delegitimise Stephen, his memory was still potent. It thus became easier for the Communists, to secure popular support, to claim some sort of political legacy from him. Even so, in Budapest, the report acknowledged, “nationalist” voices could be heard amongst the crowd, who thought commemorating Stephen I was purely tactics from the Communists. Moreover, some Party members, concerned that the Church might gain from this, also questioned “why it was necessary to celebrate Stephen I: ‘if Nixon gives us the Crown back, then it made sense, otherwise not’.”⁸¹

The events of the 1970 millennium commemorations paved the way for Stephen to return to the national day calendar, and not only in his political form as king but also in his religious form as saint. By the 1980s, Stephen was again the integral part of the commemorative narrative of 20 August celebrations. It was now a day that praised “tradition and progress”, commemorating not simply the 1949 Communist constitution, but “the beginning of a historical process which has been a constant factor in our nation’s existence” as Gyula Kállai, President of National Council of the Patriotic People’s Front, put it in 1983.⁸² 1983 also saw the premier of the rock opera *Stephen, the king*

⁸⁰ MOL M-KS 288-22/3 (1970).

⁸¹ *Ibid.* The Holy Crown of St Stephen was taken to Fort Knox in 1945 at the request of the Hungarian bishops, to protect it from the Arrow Cross Party, the Hungarian Nazi party, and was returned to Hungary on 6 January 1978 after much negotiation between Hungary and the USA. For the return see: “Nemzeti ereklyénk” [Our national relic] in *Népszabadság*, 6 January 1978: 1. For the background see: Glant 2000 and Mevius 2011.

⁸² Kállai, Gyula. “Hagyomány és haladás” [Tradition and progress] in *Népszabadság*, 20 August 1983: 1.

(*István, a király*), “a celebration of the life and work of Stephen as a national hero.”⁸³ It was premiered with a live performance two days before the 20 August celebrations in 1983 in Városliget (Budapest City Park). The main storyline deals with the rivalry between Stephen (Christianity) and his uncle Koppány (paganism), who attempts to prevent the conversion of the Hungarians to Christianity. The religious element is thus very much in the rock opera, and as Christopher Hann observed, “Christians in the audiences were not made to feel that their saint was being distorted to fit a socialist mould.”⁸⁴ The rock opera was a huge success. Around 100,000 people saw the live event and when the film premiered in the cinema more than 1,000,000 people bought tickets to see it. The soundtrack also sold extremely well when it was released.⁸⁵

This restoration, not simply of the figure of Stephen, but also his specifically religious status continued in the 1980s. Both the Communists and the Catholic Church sought to shore up their public support through St Stephen.⁸⁶ In 1988, Stephen was commemorated as a Catholic saint when, for the first time since 1947, the Holy Right procession was held.⁸⁷ The customary 20 August article in *Népszabadság* acknowledged that in the last decades different aspects of the day had been stressed, from the celebration of the New Bread to the celebration of worker-peasant friendship.⁸⁸ These often blurred not only the memory of St Stephen, but also the celebration of the Constitution. There were times, the article claims, when Stephen was mistakenly represented as a cruel ruler who “exterminated his own people for his ideals”. Even so, now the Communists had returned to the original ideals of Stephen, the founder of the state and the legislator.

4. Conclusion

Through this study of “villains” and “heroes” in the national day calendars of two Central European Communist countries, we can see how Communist regimes attempted to construct their own historical narratives but still felt a need to respond to and negotiate a national element. In Hungary the creation of a national day calendar by the Communists and its renegotiation from the 1960s was relatively straightforward, given that the pre-war constellation of

⁸³ Hann 1990: 13.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*: 14.

⁸⁵ Jávorszky, Béla Szilárd. *István, a király* [Stephen, the king] (1983) at <http://www.jbsz.hu/component/content/article/59-303-lemez/330-istvan-a-kiraly-1983.html> [accessed 12 November 2013].

⁸⁶ Klimó 1999: 55.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: 54.

⁸⁸ Straub, F. Brunó. “István király történeti üzenete: Cselekvően alkalmazkodni a világhoz” [The historic message of King Stephen: Actively adapting to the world] in *Népszabadság*, 20 August 1988: 1.

national days was well embedded and the political system by then was more accommodating. In Czechoslovakia, the situation was more ambiguous and this is also reflected in the absence of medieval figures in the historical narrative after the mid-1950s.

The historical narrative was “rewritten” following the system changes of 1989. In Hungary, St Stephen was not only reinstated to the level of national holiday, but August 20 was made into a state holiday, i.e. the most important national day of the country.⁸⁹ In Czechoslovakia (and later in the Czech Republic), the situation again reflected a general ambiguity that has enveloped these medieval figures since 1918. In the initial national day law only Jan Hus was “reinstated” or rather kept from the Communist national day law as a memorable day.⁹⁰ St Wenceslas only appeared again in the Czech Republic’s commemorative calendar in 2000, when a new commemorative day entitled Czech Statehood Day appeared, commemorating the Czech patron saint and being mainly Church-based.⁹¹ In stark contrast with Hungary, however, where St Stephen and his feast enjoy great popularity, in the Czech Republic neither Hus nor Wenceslas have a parallel impact.

Abbreviations:

MOL – Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian State Archives)

Newspapers:

Dělnická Besídka [Workers’ Feuilleton]
Lidová demokracie [People’s Democracy]
Národní listy [The National newspaper]
Népszabadság [People’s Freedom]
Pesti Hírlap [The Pest Newspaper]
Rudé právo [The Red Right]
Szabad Nép [The Free People]

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“167/1990 Zákon ze dne 9. května 1990, kterým se mění a doplňuje zákon č.93/1951 Sb., o státních svátcích, o dnech pracovního klidu a o památných a významných dnech, ve znění pozdějších předpisů” [167/1990 Statute Act of 9 May 1990 amending and supplementing Statute Act No. 93/1951, on state days, public holidays and memorable and significant days] 1990 in *Sbírka zákonů České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky* [Official Gazette of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic], 661. Prague: Statistické a evidenční vydavatelství tiskopisů.

⁸⁹ “Az Országgyűlés tavaszi ülészakának 10. ülésnapja 1991. március 5-én” [The Spring Session of the National Assembly, 10th session on 5 March 1991] at <http://www.parlament.hu/naplo34/084/0840048.html> [accessed 12 August 2014].

⁹⁰ “167/1990” in *Sbírka zákonů České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky* [The Official Gazette of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic], 1990: 661.

⁹¹ “245/2000” in *Sbírka zákonů Česká Republika* [The Official Gazette of the Czech Republic], 2000: 3526.

- “1950. évi 10. számú törvényerejű rendelet április 4-ének Magyarország felszabadulása napjának nemzeti ünnepé nyilvánításáról” [Legislative decree No. 10 of 1950 on the proclamation of 4 April, the day of Hungary’s liberation, as a national day] in *I. Törvények, Törvényerejű Rendeletek és Minisztertanácsi Rendeletek 1950* [I. Laws, legislative decrees and decrees by the Council of Ministers 1950], 53. Budapest: A Minisztertanács Elnökének hivatala.
- “1950. évi 37. számú törvényerejű rendelet november 7. napjának, a Nagy Októberi Szocialista Forradalom évfordulójának állami ünnepé nyilvánításáról” [Legislative decree No. 37 of 1950 on the proclamation of 7 November, the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, as a state holiday] in *I. Törvények, Törvényerejű Rendeletek és Minisztertanácsi Rendeletek 1950*, 131. Budapest: A Minisztertanács Elnökének hivatala.
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