

Sites of Memory and Forgetting: Gyula Derkovits's Woodcuts of the 1514 Peasant War

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Introduction

One of the most important artworks to emerge from the interwar Hungarian Communist movement depicted an event from national history and represented its central character as the epitome of the national hero. Gyula Derkovits's series of woodcuts *1514* narrated the Hungarian peasant uprising led by György Dózsa (1470–1514) in the eponymous year (Figs 1–11. This article reproduces the full series with the images in the original order. Separate citations are only included for images individually discussed in the text). Finished in 1929, the prints were fruit of the artist's cooperation with the illegal Hungarian Communist Party and depicted the sixteenth-century peasant war as a prefiguration of the class struggles of the artist's present. Scholarly literature on the artist has long accepted this and discussed the series as one of Derkovits's most openly political works. It is generally assumed that the prints were commissioned by the Party, but little is known about the circumstances of the commission. Consequently, the significance of the subject matter in the context of the Party's politics around the year 1929 has never been analysed beyond generalities.

To provide such an analysis, this article argues that *1514* was not just a general depiction of the Marxist idea of class struggle as a constant element of history, nor just a broad allegory of the situation of the twentieth-century proletariat. Instead, it was a visual contribution to specific debates happening within the Hungarian Communist movement at that particular time. It addressed one of the thorniest issues: can the Communist movement harness and politically exploit the fervent nationalism roused by Hungary's territorial losses after the First World War?

With the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of new states on its ruins, the politics of memory underwent crucial changes in central Europe after 1918. Historical events were reinterpreted, historical imagery discarded, recycled, and reinvented, as the states, and different political movements within them, put them in service of their self-representation. In Czechoslovakia, the cult of the religious reformer Jan Hus (1369–1415) was used to legitimise the new state. In Hungary, Regent Miklós Horthy (1868–1957) presented himself as a new version of Árpád, the pagan Hungarian leader who had conquered the territory of the country in the late ninth century.

The political movement worst placed to take part in this historical masquerade was Communism. First, Communism promised a radically new future – not a rehashing of the past. Second, Communism professed to be internationalist, and hence could not self-evidently employ national symbols. During the Hungarian

1. Boldizsár Vörös, '1848–49 történelmi személyiségei – 1918–19-ben' ['The Historical Personalities of 1848–49 in 1918–19'], in József Hudi and Péter Tóth G. (eds), *Emlékezet, kultusz, történelem* [Memory, Cult, History] (Laczkó Dezső Museum: Veszprém, 1999), pp. 45–50.
2. Martin Mevius, 'Reappraising Communism and Nationalism', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2009, p. 377.
3. David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).



Fig. 1. Gyula Derkovits, *Marchers (1514 I)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 432 × 495 mm / 522 × 762 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

Soviet Republic of 1919, most of Budapest's monuments were covered up for the grandiose festivities held on 1 May. Instead of referencing historical events or personalities, the main decorative panneaux showed general depictions of class struggle and a bright Socialist future. Of the few personalities celebrated through statues and other public depictions, most belonged to the international workers' movement: Marx, Engels, Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg. Compared to them, depictions of Hungarian historical personalities were scarce.¹

Nevertheless, although the perception that Communism and nationalism are 'wholly antagonistic and mutually exclusive' is widely influential even in scholarly discussions, it is, as Martin Mevius has put it, no more than a 'popular myth'.² In the interwar period, Communists around Europe had to contend with the success of radical nationalist movements; with the fact that nationalist imagery and rhetoric were often more efficient as rallying cries than the imagery of class struggle. The Dózsa series was one of many examples of the Communist instrumentalisation of nationalist themes. In the Soviet Union, Stalin was about to turn towards similar devices, initiating 'national Bolshevism' which would become predominant in Soviet propaganda by the mid-1930s.³ Derkovits's prints reflect the tension between internationalist ideals and nationalist methods that preoccupied Communists across Europe.

As this article will argue, the suppressed memory of this tension affected the art historical reception of the prints after 1945. The canonical interpretation of *1514* was codified in the 1950s, during the totalitarian period of the Hungarian Communist regime, when the history of the interwar workers' movement was rewritten to fit a simplified narrative devoid of uncomfortable ambiguities. The links between the prints and day-to-day debates within the interwar Party were severed by this institutionalised forgetting. Hence, the reception history of



Fig. 2. Gyula Derkovits, *Peasant Sharpening His Scythe (1514 II)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 485 × 440 mm / 595 × 515 mm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. (Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2023.)

1514 offers wider lessons about the re-evaluations of left-wing political art in Communist (and later post-Communist) countries, while also raising questions about the relationship between modern art, leftism, and nationalism, as well as about the possibilities and limits of art historical reconstruction. Furthermore, stretching past the domain of art history, it also interrogates the options available to left-wing politics when faced with the success of populist nationalism. This is a question of our time, and the story of this woodcut series by a Hungarian artist helps to consider it from a historical perspective.

1514/1929

In 1929, over a decade had passed since the end of the First World War and the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire. The independent People's Republic of Hungary had been declared on 16 November 1918 in the course of the democratic Aster Revolution, which was succeeded in March 1919 by a Communist Soviet Republic. Lasting only 133 days, this was overthrown by a counterrevolution led by Admiral Miklós Horthy. Hungary was officially a monarchy again, but without a monarch; instead, Horthy became its regent. In 1920, the Treaty of Trianon, signed in Versailles as part of the peace process, allocated two thirds of the country's former territory to its neighbours: Czechoslovakia, Romania, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), and Austria. Almost

4. See Ignác Romsics, 'Hungarian Revisionism in Thought and Action, 1920–1941: Plans, Expectations, Reality', in Marina Cattaruzza, Stefan Dyroff and Dieter Langewiesche (eds), *Territorial Revisionism and the Allies of Germany in the Second World War: Goals, Expectations, Practices* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2012), pp. 92–101.



Fig. 3. Gyula Derkovits, *Batters on the Gate (1514 III)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 440 × 494 mm / 522 × 762 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

one third of all ethnic Hungarians now lived outside the country's borders. The decision spurred widespread resentment, which the right-wing political elite exploited through the politics of *revisionism*: the idea that the Treaty should be modified in Hungary's favour.⁴ The centring of revisionism within the country's official political culture led to increasing radicalisation and, eventually, to a disastrous alliance with Nazi Germany. In 1929, however, it still seemed like this radicalisation could be contained. The Prime Minister, István Bethlen (1874–1946), aimed for a politics of 'consolidation' which restricted but did not completely ban the left-wing opposition, while also seeking to suppress right-wing extremism.

It was in this milieu that Gyula Derkovits created his woodcut series *1514*, probably on a commission from the Hungarian Communist Party, which had been banned after the Soviet Republic and now operated underground. The 1514 uprising was a seminal event in the history of Hungarian feudalism. Following a call to a crusade, peasants gathered in the field of Rákos, an area now in Budapest. By the time they had assembled, their rage was directed elsewhere: against the nobles on whose land they toiled, and who now failed to supply the army with provisions. Pillaging inevitably began. The Transylvanian nobleman György Dózsa – who had been appointed leader of the crusaders by the Archbishop – refused to disband the army and instead took the helm of the peasant insurgency. Following a series of successful sieges and battles, the fortune of the rebels changed, and they were finally defeated at Temesvár (now Timișoara, Romania). Dózsa suffered a horrible punishment: he was burnt alive on a throne set on flames, and his flesh was force fed to his soldiers. Moreover, a collection of new laws, the so-called *Tripartitum* compiled by István Werbőczy (1458–1541),



Fig. 4. Gyula Derkovits, *Insurgent Peasant (1514 IV)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 485 × 442 mm / 762 × 522 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

radically curtailed the already limited rights of peasants and solidified the rigid institution of serfdom until the nineteenth century.

Derkovits's series consists of eleven prints narrating the story from the assembly at Rákos to Dózsa's death and the ensuing oppression symbolised by Werbőczy. Although representing historical events, the woodcuts strongly referred to the present, conceptualising the sixteenth-century peasant revolt as a parable on the situation of the twentieth-century proletariat. This message was conveyed by anachronisms: in Sheet VI, *Clash* (Fig. 6), the peasants are facing twentieth-century gendarmes, and in Sheet IX, *Dózsa on the Throne of Fire* (Fig. 9), the peasant leader's torture is overseen by a bishop wearing modern spectacles. This emphasis on parallels across centuries reflected the Marxist view of history as continuous class struggle. Friedrich Engels had compared the 1524–1525 German peasant war to the revolutions of his own time in a similar vein:

Three centuries have passed and many a thing has changed; still the Peasant War is not so impossibly far removed from our present struggle, and the opponents who have to be fought are essentially the same. We shall see the classes and fractions of classes which everywhere betrayed 1848 and 1849 in the role of traitors, though on a lower level of development, already in 1525.⁵

The significance of the German peasant war as a prefiguration of modern struggles was not lost on left-wing German artists. The most emblematic

5. Friedrich Engels, 'The Peasant War in Germany', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (eds), *Collected Works*, 10 vols (New York: International Publishers, 1978), p. 399.

6. On Derkovits and Kollwitz most recently, see András Zwickl, 'Gyula Derkovits and European Art', in Katalin Bakos and András Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times* (Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 2014), pp. 48–61; and Éva Bajkay, 'The Artist's Search for Identity in Vienna', in Katalin Bakos and András Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times* (Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 2014), pp. 62–75.

7. On the Dózsa series and Masereel, see Júlia Szabó, 'Die Holzschnittfolge "1514" von Gyula Derkovits', *Acta Historiae Artium*, vol. 10, no. 1–2, 1964, pp. 202–3.

8. Boldizsár Vörös, 'A múltat végképp eltörölni?' *Történelmi személyiségek a magyarországi szocializmus és kommunista propagandában 1890–1919* ['We'll Change Henceforth the Old Tradition?' *Historical Personalities in Hungarian Social Democratic and Communist Propaganda*] (Budapest: MTA History Research Institute, 2004), pp. 29, 75–6.



Fig. 5. Gyula Derkovits, *Dózsa on the Bastion (1514 V)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 496 × 440 mm / 762 × 522 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

representation of the events was created in 1902–1908 by Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) in her series of etchings *Peasant War*. Along with many other central European graphic artists, Derkovits was a great admirer of Kollwitz's art and often explicitly drew on her work in his etchings and woodcuts.⁶ This is obvious in *1514*, too, down to the specific choice of some of the scenes, such as *Sharpening the Scythe*. At the same time, Derkovits opted for the technique of the woodcut, instead of the etching. He employed a formal language of strong, simple, black lines, more reminiscent of the Expressionist woodcuts of the Belgian Frans Masereel (1889–1972), also hugely influential in European interwar printmaking, than of Kollwitz's similarly expressive but finely executed etchings.⁷

The importance of Kollwitz's example notwithstanding, it was not the only factor in Derkovits's choice of subject matter. At the time, the Dózsa uprising already had an important place in left-wing memory politics. From the late nineteenth century, Hungarian Social Democrats and Communists had included it in various publications that promoted their concepts of the historical past.⁸ Dózsa was part of the left-wing pantheon of historical heroes – his bust even appeared in the 1 May decorations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic – even though that pantheon was to a large part an internationalist one. Most Hungarian national heroes had previously been used as symbols by other political actors – either imperialist officialdom or Hungarian nationalists – and had thus



Fig. 6. Gyula Derkovits, *Clash (1514VI)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 442 × 505 mm / 522 × 762 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

been discredited, but Dózsa had no such baggage. Far from celebrating it as a great national event, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century school textbooks had described the 1514 uprising as chaotic and violent. According to Adeline Madarász (1871–1962), daughter of the history painter Viktor Madarász (1830–1917), her teachers had called Dózsa’s army ‘a rattle-taggle assembly of crooks, robbers and other criminals’.⁹ By the interwar period, academic history writing had qualified this negative picture, but in comprehensive surveys of Hungarian history the uprising was still only mentioned as a small episode, rather than as a cornerstone of the historical narrative. To left-wing observers such as the sociologist Róbert Braun, the significance of the peasant uprising was still downplayed in school textbooks and official narratives.¹⁰ Hence, it lent itself as a firm anchor point for left-wing and Communist counternarratives of history.

That Derkovits’s prints expressed the grievances and political aims of the interwar workers’ movement has never been in doubt. After the Second World War and the Communist turn, the series was canonised as one of the greatest products of Socialist art. That the Dózsa uprising was interpreted as a prefiguration of the twentieth-century movement both before and after 1945 suggests a direct continuity between pre- and postwar Communist memory politics. As it often happens at times of regime change, countermemory became official memory. An artwork that barely avoided censorship in the 1930s now had a distinguished place in the official canon.

The following pages will complicate this picture by showing that the prints evoked an uncomfortable past, the memory of which was successfully suppressed in their public and scholarly reception. *1514* was a reminder of two things Communist officialdom did not like to be reminded of: first, the vicious

9. See her letter quoted in Béla Bíró, ‘Levél Madarász Viktor képeiről; Kossuth Lajos levele Madarász Viktorhoz’ [‘Letter about VM’s Paintings; Letter from Lajos Kossuth to VM’], *Szabad Művészet*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1952, p. 70.

10. Róbert Braun, ‘A Dózsa-féle parasztfölkelés a legújabb magyar történetírás tükrében’ [‘The Dózsa Peasants’ Uprising in the Mirror of Recent Hungarian History Writing’], *Századunk*, vol. 10, no. 4–5, 1935, pp. 188–9.

11. See e.g. Szabó, 'Die Holzschnittfolge "1514" von Gyula Derkovits', pp. 171–210; Éva Körner, *Derkovits Gyula* (Budapest: Corvina, 1968), pp. 167–171; Anna Kopócsy, 'A jelen történelmi értelmezése fa- és linóleummetszet-sorozatokban a két világháború között' ['The Historical Interpretation of the Present in Series of Woodcuts and Linocuts in the Interwar Period'], in Enikő Róka (ed.), *A modern magyar fa- és linóleummetszés 1890–1950 [Modern Hungarian wood- and linocuts]* (Miskolc: Miskolci Galéria, 2005), pp. 138–40; Péter Molnos, *Derkovits: Szemben a világgal [Derkovits: Facing the World]* (Budapest: Népszabadság and Kieselbach, 2008), pp. 45–8; Katalin Bakos, 'The "Grandchild of György Dózsa"', in Bakos and Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*, pp. 190–7.



Fig. 7. Gyula Derkovits, *Suppression (1514 VIII)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 440 × 495 mm / 522 × 762 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

infighting within the interwar Hungarian Communist Party, whose effects still resonated after 1945; and second, the Party's ambivalent stance towards nationalism and revisionism. As I will argue below, *1514* was shaped by both of these issues. It provides visual evidence of their existence even when written sources remain silent or scarce.

Given that the woodcuts belong among the most discussed artworks in twentieth-century Hungarian art history, it is all the more curious that one aspect has never been remarked upon.¹¹ Like many of Derkovits's works, multiple images in *1514* contain letters. In most cases they spell out the names of places and people, while in the image showing Dózsa's brutal execution the inscription 'BÜDÖS PARASZT' ('stinking peasant') is branded onto Dózsa's chest (Fig. 9). The aspect that has gone unnoticed relates to the place names in Sheets IV, V, and VII: Rákos, Cegléd, Csanád, Nagylak, Csála, Arad, Becse, Zádorlak (denoted by a Z in the print), Világos, Solymos, Lippa – all sites of victorious battles – and finally Temesvár (Figs 4, 5, and 7). Of these twelve places, only three still lay in Hungary in Derkovits's time. The rest had been awarded to neighbouring countries in 1920: Csanád (Cenadu Vechi), Arad (Arad), Zádorlak (Zădăreni), Világos (Șiria), Solymos (Șoimoș), Lippa (Lipova), and Temesvár (Timișoara) to Romania; Csála (Чалма/Čalma) and Becse (Беҗеј/Bečej) to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

Enumerating the names of lost places was typical of the visual culture of revisionism, but such a forceful nationalist message may seem out of place in a Communist artwork. The fact is, however, that in 1920s–1930s Hungary the resentment provoked by the Trianon Treaty spread across the political spectrum. There was such a thing as Communist revisionism; it just fell victim to historical forgetting after 1945. Its memory was silenced for direct political reasons at



Fig. 8. Gyula Derkovits, *Stakes (1514 VIII)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 438 × 513 mm / 522 × 762 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

first, and then kept suppressed by the widespread mindset that sees Communism and nationalism as mutually exclusive. In the case of *1514* this was exacerbated by a related art historical cliché: that modernism is connected to ‘progressive’ politics, and progressive politics exclude nationalism, especially in its historicist form. Things were, however, more complex. *1514* is a witness to the complexity.

Derkovits the Artist

Gyula Derkovits was born in the Western Hungarian town of Szombathely on 13 April 1894.¹² His father was a cabinet maker, and in 1910 the young Gyula started training as his apprentice. He worked in the family workshop until 1914, when he was drafted and sent to war. Following a serious injury, he was declared unfit for military service in 1915. He subsequently stayed with his brother Jenő in Budapest and worked as a cabinet maker. In the evenings, he studied drawing at an independent art school, where he met Viktória Dombai (1898–1976), his future wife, who was employed as a model. In the uncertain, violent post-war atmosphere, Derkovits placed his faith into the Communist movement. His involvement, however, did not go further, and he did not face any repercussions after the establishment of the Horthy regime. His brother, who had been more active politically, emigrated to Vienna with many of his comrades.

Despite the difficult times, Derkovits had reasons to be optimistic. On 18 April 1920, he got married. He exhibited his pictures regularly at reputable venues and gained paid commissions as an artist. Nevertheless, these were barely enough to make a living, and in May 1923 the couple were evicted from their Budapest flat for not paying rent. They decided to join Jenő in Vienna and stayed there for almost three years, during which Derkovits exhibited with Austrian artists and found new patrons. They returned to Budapest in January 1926,

12. The overview of the artist’s biography is based on: Bakos and Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*.



Fig. 9. Gyula Derkovits, *Dózsa on the Throne of Fire (1514 IX)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 515 × 438 mm / 762 × 522 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

and Derkovits continued to show his works at various venues. Having formed stronger connections with the illegal Hungarian Communist Party (Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja, KMP – literally Party of Communists in Hungary) in Vienna, the couple moved into a flat whose rent was covered by the Party, which used it for secret meetings. This arrangement, however, did not last long, and in August 1931 they were evicted again due to rent arrears. From then on, their living situation became increasingly precarious. Suffering from poor health since the war, Derkovits was less and less able to cope. He died of heart failure on 18 June 1934, at the age of 40.

Although Derkovits struggled to make a living from his art, this was at least partly due to his proud, uncompromising personality, and not to the lack of potential patrons. It is without doubt that many contemporaries regarded him highly as an artist. Several retrospective exhibitions were held in his memory in the 1930s, and his artistic legacy was preserved by his widow and supporters.

After the Communist turn of 1948–1949, the memory politics of the new regime needed symbolic figures from the past, and when it came to artist-heroes Derkovits was an excellent candidate. He was committed to left-wing politics, his family background could be stylised as working class, and his tragic fate could



Fig. 10. Gyula Derkovits, *Werbőczy (1514 X)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 514 × 438 mm / 762 × 522 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

be blamed on the ills of capitalist society. There was, however, a problem: his art hardly conformed to the expectations of the rigid Socialist Realism of the 1950s.¹³ It was not that this art was not political: many of Derkovits's paintings had an overt left-wing message. He often highlighted the misery of the urban proletariat (Fig. 12) or satirised the bourgeoisie. His best-known painting, *Generations* (Fig. 13), shows a working-class father educating himself while his wife feeds their baby under a portrait of Marx. However, although the subject matter of these paintings was easily identifiable, they were still conceived in a modernist formal idiom seen as contradictory to Socialist Realist values. In Socialist Realism, the painting was conceptualised as a window onto the real world: its figures and objects were supposed to be material and tangible, creating an illusion of reality even in the most far-fetched depictions of 'Stalin visiting the factory'. Derkovits, however, treated the pictorial plane as a flat surface and the composition as a construction of the artistic intellect.¹⁴ Recent scholarship has described some of his paintings as montage-like 'picture-essays', because they bring together a variety of reality-inspired, yet symbolic motifs that, when 'read' together, make up the political-social-artistic message of the composition.¹⁵ An example is the portrait of Marx in *Generations*, which, in its sketchiness, can also be interpreted as a portrait of the family's deceased grandfather. Such ambivalence would have been impermissible in a Socialist Realist painting, while in

13. On Derkovits's reception under Communism, see Éva Ständeisky, 'Appropriations: Derkovits in Times of Change', in Bakos and Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*, pp. 122–35; and Barbara Büki, 'The Past Is Still Present: A Painter in the Public Arena', in Bakos and Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*, pp. 136–49.

14. On Derkovits's artistic credo, see Katalin Bakos, 'An Oeuvre with the Power to Engage', in Bakos and Zwickl (eds), *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*, p. 26.

15. Bakos, 'An Oeuvre with the Power to Engage', pp. 37–43.

16. Lajos Németh, 'Das Gemälde von Gyula Derkovits "Drei Generationen"', *Acta Historiae Artium*, vol. 6, no. 1–2, 1960, pp. 103–14; Szabó, 'Die Holzschnittfolge "1514" von Gyula Derkovits'; Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*; Lajos Fülep, *Rippl Rónai, Csontváry, Derkovits* (Budapest: Magvető, 1975).



Fig. 11. Gyula Derkovits, *Brother Lőrinc (1514 XI)*, 1928–9, woodcut on paper, 497 × 409 mm / 762 × 522 mm. Budapest History Museum, Museum Kiscelli – Municipal Gallery, Budapest.

Derkovits's pictorial world it enhanced the overall message by characterising Marx as a benevolent (grand)father figure of the interwar workers' movement.

Derkovits was approached cautiously in 1950s Hungary: he was viewed as an artist who had the right ideas but expressed them in the wrong way. By the mid-1960s, however, things were changing. The hard-line Stalinism of the 1950s was left behind as János Kádár's regime consolidated itself, moving towards the more permissive system soon to be known as 'goulash Communism'. For art historians wishing to expand the horizons of the Hungarian art world, this was an opportunity to cautiously advocate for modernist values. In this process, Derkovits became a figurehead.¹⁶ Now fully accepted by the art establishment, he gave his name to, among other things, a state-run commercial art gallery, a housing estate in Szombathely, and a grant for young artists. Reproductions of his paintings decorated the walls of countless offices and homes. Pacified by its simplest interpretation, the *Dózsa* series assumed its position in the canon.



Fig. 12. Gyula Derkovits, *The Hungry in Winter (Outside a Bakery)*, 1930, oil, tempera and silver pigment on canvas, 76 × 64.5 cm. Savaria Megyei Hatókörű Városi Múzeum – Szombathelyi Képtár, Szombathely.

1514: What Do We Know?

Derkovits's *1514* was born in the midst of the illegal interwar Hungarian Communist movement, which operated in conspiratorial silence. Our knowledge about its origins is hence riddled with question marks. It is not that there are no written primary sources available about the Hungarian Communist Party: despite the dangers, the Party published periodicals, corresponded with comrades internationally, kept contact with Moscow, and produced manifestoes and strategic plans. Still, these sources leave many questions unanswered. To fill in the empty spaces, we need insight into personal friendships and animosities, rivalries whose significance was inevitably magnified in a close-knit group operating under stressful circumstances; we need to understand the paranoia arising from the double political pressure exerted by the right-wing Hungarian government on the one hand, and the increasingly totalitarian Soviet Union on the other. The subsequent memoirs that could theoretically illuminate these issues were, however, produced at a time when full disclosure was still impossible, even if for different reasons. The Communist turn of 1948–1949 undoubtedly constituted a great rupture, but the same relationships, rivalries, and animosities lived on,



Fig. 13. Gyula Derkovits, *Generations (Three Generations)*, 1932, oil, gold and silver pigment on canvas, 103 × 77.8 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. (Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2023.)

even if some of their protagonists had since died. Those who prevailed sought to commemorate their own truths and erase those of their rivals. The interwar Communist movement was now a site of memory that had to be kept clean and simple, devoid of anything inconvenient. Sources were, yet again, dotted with silences and half-truths.

Given these circumstances, the fact that our knowledge of *1514*'s origins is blurred is in itself an important piece of information, because it suggests that some details may have been deliberately erased when the official memory of interwar Hungarian Communism was constructed in the 1950s. Indeed, the most important primary source on *1514* originates from this period. In her memoirs first published in 1955, Derkovits's widow stated that the idea for the series originated from the 'Vienna comrades': that is, the Vienna-based group of Hungarian Communist emigrés with whom the Derkovitses had come into contact through the artist's brother during their stay in the Austrian

capital.¹⁷ Known as the ‘Landler faction’ after its central figure, Jenő Landler (1875–1928), this group included important personalities such as the philosopher György (Georg) Lukács (1885–1971) and József Révai (1898–1959), who was to become the much-feared Minister of Culture of the Stalinist early 1950s.¹⁸ It is accepted as a fact that the subject matter of *1514* was suggested to Derkovits by someone from this circle, but the identity of that person is debated.¹⁹ Nevertheless, although Viktória Derkovits’s account did not connect the original inspiration to a specific person, she related how a number of comrades, among them Révai and Imre Sallai (1897–1932), visited them at Christmas 1929 and looked at the finished prints with much delight.²⁰ According to Viktória, in January 1930 Lukács had visited them with the good news that the Party would soon send payment for the first portfolio of the series.²¹ In an interview published more than twenty years later, she also identified Lukács as the person who had first communicated the Party commission to Derkovits.²² Despite these clues, literature on the prints does not regard Lukács as their possible originator.

The purpose of the prints is similarly obscure. Derkovits was originally commissioned to produce small, postcard-sized sheets, which – as Viktória tells us – would have been cheaper and easier to distribute. This suggests that the woodcuts were intended as agitative material. Then, however, he came across eleven large pear-wood panels in a shop and could not resist their superior quality.²³ Hence the sheets became larger and more expensive. If the intention was to distribute them as pamphlets to the working class, the change in format defeated this purpose. Nevertheless, it seems the Party did not see this as a problem.

The early reception of the prints is almost completely unknown. Viktória claimed that they were first distributed in Vienna.²⁴ According to a contemporary newspaper report, they were sold in the Ottó Bookshop in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia (formerly Pozsony, Hungary), in 1930; this, however, does not necessarily mean that they reached a proletarian audience.²⁵ In 1934 they were displayed at a memorial exhibition organised at the Ernst Museum in Budapest – a venue not associated with the Communist party. Finally, in 1936 the prints were published in a smaller format as an album by the periodical *Gondolat* (*Thought*), a legal publication of the illegal Communist party. The publication was initiated and overseen by Viktória Derkovits, and the images were accompanied by two forewords written by the left-wing art critics György Bálint (1906–1943) and Ernő Kállai (1890–1954).²⁶ They characterised Derkovits as a painter of the poor and downtrodden, emphasising that he had originally intended the prints – as well as his entire oeuvre – for ‘the people’. Hence, the album softened the political message of the series by deriving it from Derkovits’s personal artistic credo, rather than the agitative activities of the Party, and from the artist’s general identification with the poor, rather than a clear Communist conviction. This silence was, however, probably due to the need to avoid censorship, and did not mean that the prints no longer had an agitative purpose. Indeed, in the same year and the year after, the woodcuts – as reproduced in the album – were displayed and sold with great success at the June outdoor fêtes organised for workers by the Social Democratic party. At these events, the Group of Socialist Artists set up displays where Derkovits’s works featured prominently. The installations had to be protected from the police, which nevertheless confiscated some works, including the original clichés to *1514*.²⁷

Despite the uncertainties, Viktória’s claim that the idea of *1514* originated from the Party is plausible. This was not the first time that the ‘Vienna comrades’ had initiated a series of prints narrating a historical precedent of the workers’ movement: in 1923, Béla Uitz (1887–1972) had produced *General Ludd*, a series

17. Gyuláné Derkovits, *Mi ketten: Emlékezés Derkovits Gyulára* [*Us Two: Remembering Gy. D.*] (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Alap, 1954), p. 89. The book bears the date 1954 but was in reality published the following year.

18. A list of names can be gleaned from the signatories of the ‘Ultimatum to the Central Committee’ dated 30 October 1921 and signed by Jenő Derkovits alongside other members of the Landler faction, including Lukács. Archives of the Institute of Political History, Budapest; published on the website of the Lukács Archives: <<https://www.lana.info.hu/lukacs-gyorgy/lukacs-gyorgy-muvei/lukacs-gyorgy-publicisztikaja-1920-22/ultimatum-a-kb-hoz/>> [accessed 31 August 2023].

19. For a summary of the various possibilities proposed in previous literature, see Bakos, ‘The “Grandchild of György Dózsa”’, p. 190.

20. Derkovits, *Mi ketten*, pp. 91–3.

21. Derkovits, *Mi ketten*, p. 93.

22. Béla Hegyi, ‘A Vigilia beszélgetése Derkovits Gyulánéval – két emlékeztetővel’ [‘The Periodical Vigilia Interviews Mrs Gyula Derkovits – with Two Reminders’], *Vigilia*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1976, p. 29.

23. Derkovits, *Mi ketten*, p. 89.

24. Pongrác Galsai, ‘“Nem a tárgyakban őrzöm ...”: Beszélgetés Derkovits Gyulánéval’ [“I Don’t Preserve It in Objects ...”: Conversation with Mrs Gyula Derkovits’], *Enigma*, vol. 20, no. 74, 2013 (originally published in *Nők Lapja*, 17 November 1962, pp. 6–7), p. 59.

25. Büki, ‘The Past Is Still Present’, pp. 137, 148, note 10.

26. György Bálint, *Gyula Derkovits, 1514: 11 fámetszet* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1936), s. p.

27. Büki, ‘The Past Is Still Present’, pp. 137–8.

28. Éva Bajkay, *Uitz Béla* (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1987), pp. 58–9.

29. On the effect of these events on revisionist activity, see Miklós Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary: 1920–1945* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 2007), pp. 92–3, 103.

30. Lord Rothermere, 'Hungary's Place in the Sun: Safety for Central Europe', *Daily Mail*, 21 June 1927.

31. Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary*, pp. 202–6.

32. Ottó Légrády (ed.), *Justice for Hungary: The Cruel Errors of Trianon* (Budapest: Légrády Brothers, 1930). Hungarian, French, German, and Italian versions were also published.

of etchings about the Luddites, on a similar party commission.²⁸ Furthermore, as I will demonstrate below, the Dózsa commission fitted into debates happening within the Hungarian Communist Party at the same time. To understand how, we first have to examine the series' strange revisionist undertones.

1514 and Revisionist Imagery

In 1928–1929, when Derkovits began working on his prints, revisionist politics in Hungary were on the rise. The commissioners delegated by the League of Nations to enforce the provisions of the peace treaties (including those that banned agitation against the treaties) had left the country the year before; furthermore, Prime Minister Bethlen had signed an agreement with Italy that seemed to finally improve Hungary's position in international diplomacy.²⁹ Consequently, revisionist campaigning became more overt and gained more explicit governmental support. In addition, in 1927 the revisionist cause found an influential British supporter: in his article 'Hungary's Place in the Sun', Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail*, argued against the perceived injustices of the Trianon Treaty.³⁰ The number of revisionist publications, images, and monuments grew exponentially, saturating Hungarian visual culture to such an extent that it was impossible to ignore. Derkovits's *1514* has to be understood in this context.

In *Dózsa on the Bastion*, the peasant leader holds up a flag with the names of ten localities, eight of which now belonged to new countries. It is, of course, possible to argue that the list simply names the locations of battles won by the peasants: it is based on facts that did not change just because geopolitical circumstances changed 400 years later. The problem with this explanation is not just that it rests on a naive assumption of realism – the inclusion of the list was an artistic choice made by Derkovits, not an objective necessity – but also that it ignores the emphatically non-realist nature of *1514*. In the case of the gendarmes or the bespectacled bishop, the prints used blatant anachronisms to point out parallels with the present. Could this not also be true of *Dózsa on the Bastion*?

The evocation of lost places through the medium of textual inscriptions was an important element in the imagery of revisionism. The most visible example was the naming of streets in Hungary after locations now outside the borders.³¹ In newly built neighbourhoods, these street names appeared in close proximity to each other. In this way, the lost localities were symbolically retained and embedded into the Hungary that was left. Words like 'Lippa' or 'Temesvár' were no longer neutral designators of specific geographical locations: they were political slogans. For someone alive in the years around 1930, it was impossible to read Dózsa's banner in Derkovits's print without being aware of this layer of meaning. The composition was closely related to revisionist imagery, such as a scene from a children's play performed in the 1930s in which the children personifying lost towns held up signs proclaiming their names (Fig. 14).

Furthermore, the revisionist way of thinking is also present in how the historical narrative is constructed in *1514*. For revisionists, it was essential to prove that the territory of historical Hungary was one organic whole, and one way to do that was to demonstrate that the history of the Hungarian nation had played out in the entire area. Interwar Hungarian popular histories spun historical narratives in a way that highlighted how they spread out in space. A seminal example was the revisionist album *Justice for Hungary!*, published in five different languages between 1928 and 1930.³² The album told the political and cultural history of Hungary through a wide range of images. Emphasising the spatial dimension of the historical narrative, it showed sequences of locations related to historical



Fig. 14. Schoolchildren performing a revisionist play, photograph from the 1930s. Hungarian National Museum, Historical Photo Department, 653/1962 Fk.

personalities in order to demonstrate how their lives spanned the territory of Greater Hungary.

The official history promoted in *Justice for Hungary!* was very different from how Communists conceived of Hungary's past. The album made no mention of the uprising led by Dózsa, neither in word nor in image. In its narrative, which presented the history of the nation as a history of state building and struggle against foreign oppression, the peasant revolt had no significance. It is all the more notable that Derkovits depicted the events of 1514 in a way similar to *Justice for Hungary!*, paying particular attention to their spatiality. The list of battles in Sheet V is, on the one hand, a timeline, but on the other hand it also draws up a mental map: one that stretches, comfortably and self-evidently, past the borders of the new, smaller Hungary.

This emphasis on national space is understandable in revisionist memory politics, whose central aim was to mark out a geographical area as essentially Hungarian. Communism, by contrast, promoted the idea of internationalism. Why, then, did the Party commission an artwork that mirrored the official anti-Trianon discourse, and why did a Communist artist carry out the commission?

The Hungarian Communist Party and Trianon

The Hungarian Communist Party was founded on 24 November 1918. In March 1919 it merged with the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, one of the governing parties of the Hungarian People's Republic, and on 21 March it declared the Hungarian Soviet Republic. After the latter's collapse, most of the Party's prominent personalities left the country to avoid prosecution. Some, like the leader of the Soviet Republic Béla Kun (1886–1938), ended up in the Soviet Union; others settled in Vienna, Berlin, or elsewhere. Personal rivalries and disagreements over strategy led to bitter infighting between different factions. The most important division lay between Kun's Moscow group and the Vienna group headed by Landler. The difference between them was strategic, but also revealed

33. On the factions, see Péter Sipos, *Legális és illegális munkásmozgalom (1919–1944)* [*The Legal and Illegal Workers' Movement*] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1988), pp. 119–31. For a personal perspective, see Lukács's reminiscences: György Lukács, *Megélt gondolkodás: Életrajz magánóralagon* [*Lived Thought: A Biography on Tape*] (Budapest: Magvető, 1989), pp. 179–96.

34. László Kóvágó, 'A kommunista párt és Trianon' ['The Communist Party and Trianon'], *História*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1981, pp. 7–9.

35. See the *Memorandum* addressed by Jenő Landler, György Lukács, János Hirossik, and Béla Szántó to the Executive Committee of the Communist International in February 1921, Archives of the Institute of Political History, Budapest; published on the website of the Lukács Archives: <<https://www.lana.info.hu/lukacs-gyorgy/lukacs-gyorgy-muvei/lukacs-gyorgy-publicisztikaja-1920-1929/landler-jeno-lukacs-gyorgy-hirossik-janos-es-szanto-bela-memoranduma-a-kommunista-internacionale-vegrehajto-bizottsagahoz-1921-marciusabol/>> [accessed 31 August 2023].

36. Lukács himself characterised the theses in this way, citing Révai's contemporary opinion. See Lukács, *Megélt gondolkodás*, p. 191. For the text, see György Lukács, 'Téziservezet a magyar politikai és gazdasági helyzetről s a KMP feladatairól' ['Draft Theses on the Hungarian Political and Economic Situation and the Tasks of the Hungarian Communist Party'], ed. Ágnes Szabó, *Párttörténeti Közlemények*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1975, pp. 156–207.

37. Lukács, 'Téziservezet', p. 206.

38. 'Trianon revíziója: A Szovjetunió elleni háború jelszava' ['The Revision of Trianon: Slogan of the War Against the Soviet Union'], *Új Március*, July 1927, pp. 326–30. See László Kóvágó, 'A magyar kommunista párt nemzetiség-politikája a Tanácsköztársaság megdöntésétől a felszabadulásig' ['Nationality Politics of the Hungarian Communist Party from the Fall of the Council Republic to Liberation'], *Párttörténeti Közlemények*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1977, p. 81.

a difference in general outlook. While Landler focused on the practical aspects of slowly developing a strong, potentially victorious Communist movement in Hungary, Kun sought to rapidly enforce decisions made in Moscow, regardless of the effect on the actual Hungarian situation.³³

This dogmatic approach posed problems because the Hungarian situation was complicated, and one of the issues where it was necessary to tread carefully was that of Trianon, which presented an almost unsurmountable conundrum to Hungarian Communists. In 1920, the Second World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) condemned the Paris peace process as imperialist violence and identified the shattering of the treaties as a Communist goal.³⁴ This general principle could, however, easily raise the suspicion of nationalism when put into practice by comrades in the countries negatively affected by the treaties. Hence, in 1921 the Landler faction had to defend itself in front of the Comintern against accusations of 'territorial integrity-ism' regarding its agitative activity among the Hungarians of Czechoslovakia and Romania.³⁵

The issue of Trianon complicated not only the Hungarian party's relationship to Moscow but also its position within the Hungarian political landscape. On the surface, their situation was easy: given the overwhelming anti-Trianon sentiment of the Hungarian public, taking a revisionist stance could only have a positive effect on the popularity of the Communist movement. Nevertheless, with Hungary's right-wing politicians increasingly using Trianon as a political tool, the illegal party faced the danger of having to agree with official rhetoric: the nuances between Communist and right-wing revisionism were too complex to explain in agitative leaflets and catchy slogans. It was imperative for them to distinguish themselves more radically and visibly.

In September 1928, Lukács was tasked with drafting a strategic document as part of the preparations for the Hungarian party's second congress. The resulting text, known as the *Blum Theses* (Blum being Lukács's conspiratorial pseudonym), summed up the anti-dogmatic Realpolitik of the Landler faction by providing a detailed account of the Hungarian political situation and proposing new strategies for navigating it.³⁶ The essay stirred up much controversy within the party and was subsequently denounced by the Comintern; a series of events that led to Lukács's eventual withdrawal from political action and his turn towards philosophy. Instead of advocating for an immediate 'proletarian dictatorship', the *Theses* argued for an intermediate 'democratic dictatorship' better suited to the Hungarian circumstances. To Lukács, democratic principles such as free speech or the freedom of assembly seemed crucial in opposing the Bethlen government, which curtailed these freedoms. The *Theses* discussed the role of every political party and class; the question of Trianon was one small but important element in the argument. As Lukács saw it, the government's failure in furthering revisionism via diplomacy meant that it was now forced to join the western powers in their preparations for a war against the Soviet Union. Hungarian peasants and workers were just pawns in this game, and revisionism was a popular issue employed to gain their support for the war. Hence, Lukács proclaimed, the Hungarian Communist Party needed to reject revisionism using the slogans 'Down with territorial integrity! Down with the revisionist swindle!'³⁷

Lukács's suggestions did not arise out of nowhere: when he formulated them, Trianon was already the subject of much deliberation in the Landler circle. In July 1927, an editorial in *Új Március* (*New March*), the periodical of the Hungarian Communist Party, had proclaimed that the revision of Trianon and the reestablishment of Hungary's 'thousand-year-old' borders was an imperialist slogan employed with the purpose of inciting a war against the Soviet Union.³⁸ In order to counter it, Hungary's revolutionary workers had to connect the aim

of defending the Soviet Union with the aim of shattering Trianon. Lukács completed the *Blum Theses* in January 1929, and by spring József Révai went even further. In his editorial in *Új Március*, he argued that, in the current political and social situation, the revision of Trianon only served the interests of the ruling classes and consequently had to be completely dropped by Communists as a political aim.³⁹ In May 1929, the party distributed pamphlets with the slogan ‘Down with revisionism!’, probably on Révai’s initiative.⁴⁰

The Comintern’s response was swift and deadly. Recognising that the Hungarian party’s new strategy reacted to the Hungarian right’s successful revisionist agitation, they issued an open letter which denounced Révai’s editorial and the *Blum Theses* as ‘opportunism’.⁴¹ One of the fiercest critics of Lukács’s *Theses* was Béla Kun, who condemned the philosopher for employing the ‘negative’ slogan ‘Down with territorial integrity!’ without accompanying it with the ‘positive’ values of national self-determination.⁴²

Faced with this strong opposition, Révai quickly took a U-turn, and in autumn 1929 published a new article on revisionism.⁴³ Refuting his own previous arguments, he now held that the Party should explain to workers that it was possible to fight jointly against imperialism and Trianon. There was a difference between the imperialist revisionism of the ruling classes and the justified national demands of the working class, because the latter stemmed from their opposition to international imperialism. Reading between the lines, Révai’s real reasoning is obvious: the working class was overwhelmingly against Trianon, and it would have been politically disadvantageous to dismiss their revisionist sentiments.

A few months after the publication of Révai’s self-critical article, he and other comrades were approvingly scrutinising the finished woodcuts in Derkovits’s home. Given the notable overlap both in time and people, it is logical to assume, even without direct evidence, that *1514* fitted into these debates about party policy and strategy. The debates themselves, in turn, fitted into wider developments in the international Communist movement’s attitude to nationalist agitation.

Communism and Nationalism

It may seem surprising that the Moscow-based Comintern supported nationalist ideas over Lukács’s internationalist approach to Trianon. It is true that, overall, class ties took priority over other axes of identification in Soviet Communist thought. Although Lenin had originally championed a broader autonomy for nations joining the Soviet Union, the principle of national self-determination was quickly watered down in party decisions.⁴⁴ Yet, different conceptualisations of national autonomy and evaluations of nationalism still coexisted in European leftist thought. The Comintern had no qualms about instrumentalising nationalism, or even xenophobia and antisemitism, to further its aims outside the Soviet Union: in Germany, for instance, it had directed the German Communist Party to use such slogans to win over right-wing voters several times in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the attitude towards nationalist propaganda was shifting within the Soviet Union too. 1927 was the year of the War Scare, when the Soviet leadership panicked over the supposed possibility of an imminent attack by western powers. They came to realise that, when it came to mass mobilisation, socialist slogans of class struggle were not efficient enough. Instead, as Stalin himself soon declared, flesh-and-blood heroes, preferably from national history, were needed to fire up the imagination, and Russian patriotism had to be called upon to build a stronger allegiance to the Soviet state on the part of the Russian-speaking population. By the mid-1930s, this new approach

39. [József Révai], ‘A magyar munkásosztály és a revízió’ [‘The Hungarian Working Class and Revision’], *Új Március*, April–May–June 1929, pp. 131–8.

40. See Kóvágó, ‘A magyar kommunista párt nemzetiségpolitikája’, p. 82–3.

41. Kóvágó, ‘A magyar kommunista párt nemzetiségpolitikája’, p. 83.

42. Miklós Lackó, ‘A Blum-tézisek’ [‘The Blum Theses’], *Történelmi Szemle*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1974, p. 370. See also Sipos, *Legális és illegális munkásmozgalom*, pp. 159–63.

43. Kemény [József Révai], ‘Harcoljon-e a Kommunista Magyarországi Pártja Trianon ellen?’ [‘Should the Hungarian Communist Party Fight Against Trianon?’], *Új Március*, August–November 1929, pp. 315–24. Republished in Miklós Zeidler (ed.), *Trianon* (Budapest: Osiris, 2008), pp. 398–406.

44. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 84–90; Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (Houndmills, London, and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin’s Press, 1999), pp. 15–22.

45. Mevius, ‘Reappraising Nationalism and Communism’, pp. 383–4.



Fig. 15. L'udovít Fulla, *Jánošík under the Galows (Jánošík V)*, 1923, linocut and colour on paper, 8.5 × 6.5 cm. Liptovská Galéria Petra Michala Bohúňa, Liptovský Mikuláš.

46. Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, p. 6.

47. Cornelia Cabuk, *Otto Rudolf Schatz: Monografie und Werkverzeichnis*, eds. Stella Rollig and Christian Huemer (Belvedere Werkverzeichnisse. 7) (Vienna: Belvedere, 2018), <<https://werkverzeichnisse.belvedere.at/groups/otto-rudolf-schatz/results>> [accessed 18 October 2023].

had developed into what is known in the literature as ‘national Bolshevism’: a russocentric repackaging of the Marxist-Leninist worldview.⁴⁶

Derkovits’s *Dózsa* series preceded the full unfolding of national Bolshevism by a few years, but it can be seen as signalling a similar shift within the memory politics of the Hungarian Communist movement. In 1923, Uitz was tasked with representing the Luddites, a movement in England. In choosing the *Dózsa* series as the subject matter for the next commission, the Party narrowed its focus to Hungary. This time, the goal was not just to provide a historical example of class struggle but also to reach out to Hungarian workers by appealing to their national sentiments.

The aim of addressing the specificities of the Hungarian political environment can also explain why Derkovits’s *1514* stands relatively alone in the central European context. Narrative series of prints were popular in the interwar period and often – although not always – conveyed a political message. Most of these works, however, either related recent events or critiqued contemporary life, or maybe presented a future utopia. Very few of them engaged with the distant, national past like Derkovits’s series. Among political prints created by left-wing artists, the old internationalist themes remained dominant. An example is the Austrian Otto Rudolf Schatz (1900–1961), a committed Social Democrat who created a wide array of wood engravings depicting the struggles of workers – but in general terms, rather than in a historical perspective.⁴⁷

In a broader sense, *1514* certainly fits into the search for new historical models and new concepts of national identity which permeated post-1918 central European culture, and to which left-wingers were not immune. A peasant hero whose interwar symbolism is somewhat comparable to that of *Dózsa* was Juraj Jánošík (1688–1713), a legendary bandit gradually shaped into a national hero by the Slovak national movement. In new Czechoslovakia, he offered a counterpoint to previous Austro-Hungarian rule, an example of a hero of the lower classes, as well as a point of identification for Slovaks within the multi-national but Czech-dominated state. Jánošík was depicted in paintings and prints by a range of Slovak artists, most of whom treated the theme of the peasant-hero as an opportunity to employ an imagery inspired by vernacular culture and the atmosphere of folk tales. In 1923, L'udovít Fulla (1902–1980) told the story of Jánošík in a series of five coloured linocuts (Fig. 15). Softly delineated and composed with a balladistic taciturnity, these images have little in common with Derkovits’s expressive and openly agitative compositions.

Indeed, in using history in such a way, Derkovits’s series has few parallels in central Europe. The problem of addressing questions of national identity may have been a general one for the international Communist movement, but visual artists reacted to it in different ways, as prompted by their specific situation. In Czechoslovakia, the central element of the official image of the state was modernity and progress, and references to history were secondary to this, while in Hungary official propaganda prioritised the idea of ‘historical Hungary’, and hence a wide range of historical imagery, to further the revisionist cause. The Communist movement adapted to this situation by appropriating some of the rhetoric, while offering its own alternative narrative of history. The goal of the *Dózsa* series was to make a splash in a public discourse dominated by a historically inclined nationalism.

1514 as Protest Art

Although no details are known about the Party’s plans to use Derkovits’s woodcuts as agitative material, we do know that the artist himself was more than ready



Fig. 16. Gyula Derkovits, *1514 Banner*, 1930, ink, woodcut on paper and wood, 240 × 185 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. (Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2023.)

to use them as such. According to Viktória, he offered the woodcuts for free to the editors of *Népszava* (*The People's Voice*), the daily newspaper of the Social Democratic Party, before the large workers' demonstration organised by the unions on 1 September 1930.⁴⁸ When he was rejected, he used the prints to create a banner for the demonstration (Fig. 16). Although he did not carry the banner in the end, this montage provides us with an idea of how Derkovits envisioned his woodcuts as catalysts for political change.⁴⁹

The series as used in the banner is not identical to the series as it was published. Derkovits replaced the print depicting Brother Lőrinc, a Franciscan monk in Dózsa's army who had gone on fighting after the leader's execution, with an image showing a more contemporary-looking imprisoned worker breaking through the rails of his cell. He also changed the order of the series. The print with the imprisoned worker – which would have been the last one – was produced in a larger size than the others and placed in the centre. The rest of the prints were shuffled in a specific way: instead of following a chronological order, images showing a larger cast of characters were separated from the ones

48. Derkovits, *Mi ketten*, p. 63.

49. Derkovits, *Mi ketten*, p. 63; Bakos, 'Dózsa György unokája', p. 196.

50. See Landler, Lukács, Hirossik, and Szántó, *Memorandum*.

that depicted one monumental figure. The latter were arranged symmetrically: the peasant sharpening his scythe in the top row in the centre, Werbőczy putting a peasant in stocks (originally Sheet X) and the *Insurgent Peasant* with his scythe (originally Sheet IV) on two sides of the central image in the second row, and *Dózsa on the Throne of Fire* (originally Sheet IX) and *Dózsa on the Bastion* (originally Sheet V) similarly juxtaposed in the third row. The bottom row showed peasants executed on stakes (originally Sheet VIII), followed by *Clash* (originally Sheet VI) and *Suppression* (originally Sheet VII). By breaking up the historical timeline, the banner emphasised the message conveyed by the dates ‘1514’ and ‘193...’ written in the centre in red: that Dózsa’s story stood for the ongoing struggle of oppressed workers at all times.

This rearrangement draws attention to a salient feature of the series: instead of focusing on visual storytelling, it was more concerned with providing self-sufficient iconic images. This is certainly true of the pictures showing towering single figures, which could serve as banners in themselves. In the second and third row of the 1930 banner, the chronology was changed so that these pairs of images spelled out oppression followed by defiant uprising, rather than rebellion followed by defeat. In this arrangement, the victorious *Dózsa on the Bastion* serves as a banner within a banner; an iconic image that encapsulates the purpose of the montage as a whole. This underscores that the list of place names in this picture is not a timeline but a collection of slogans – slogans whose meaning was well known from anti-Trianon imagery. Hence, the sixteenth-century peasant leader becomes a personification of connecting the aims of the workers’ movement with the aim of shattering Trianon, as formulated in the Party’s internal debates.

There is, however, a contradiction here: if the comrades of the Vienna faction were trying to get rid of revisionism as a political goal, why would they commission a series of prints promoting revisionism? Here, it is important to remember the timeline of events. Work began on the *Dózsa* series in late 1928 or early 1929, when the Vienna faction was rethinking its Trianon strategy. At the time, the Hungarian Communist Party was preparing for its next congress and a hopefully successful reform of its strategy. In this context, the commissioning of a symbolic artwork makes sense; it even explains why they agreed to the change from a cheaper to a more representative format. The order in which Derkovits created the individual compositions is unknown, but the Party’s U-turn on revisionism happened in the very months he was producing them, and *Dózsa on the Bastion* is a perfect visual encapsulation of the final strategy. Based on Viktória’s memoirs, József Révai – author of an anti-revisionist article and then of its revisionist revocation – was one of the comrades most involved in the production of the prints, and one of those expressing their satisfaction at Christmas 1929 – when the turn back towards revisionism was already confirmed.

The timeline fits perfectly. Nevertheless, without any explicit sources, I am hesitant to claim that the place names in *Dózsa on the Bastion* were specifically included by Derkovits after Révai’s revisionist turn. Instead, I suggest interpreting the series in the broader context of the Vienna group’s long-lasting trepidation around the issue. Before its attempt to do away with revisionism, the Landler faction had earned a reputation for agitating in the ‘lost’ territories. The *Dózsa* series continued along these lines: the only information we have on its distribution immediately after it was finished is that it was sold in Bratislava – that is, in former ‘Greater Hungary’. In 1921, the faction had refuted accusations of ‘territorial integrity-ism’ by explaining that their aim was to persuade workers from the Hungarian minority to ally with Communists of other ethnicities and join local Communist groups.⁵⁰ This fitted into the programme promoted by the Comintern regarding the peace treaties: national

self-determination within a Central European federation, brought about by the triumph of fraternal Communist movements co-operating internationally. The Dózsa uprising was a pertinent symbol in this regard: the majority of Dózsa's rebels had been non-Hungarian speakers. The events of 1514 provided a model for a workers' revolution stretching across borders. Derkovits's images acknowledged the grief that Hungarian workers felt over Trianon, but identified the ruling classes as the real enemy and proposed solidarity as a way out of their dire situation. As an iconic image, *Dózsa on the Bastion* was a call to workers with whom anti-Trianon imagery resonated to channel their anger into this greater fight.

Veils of Silence

The story of Derkovits's *1514* is full of gaps, silences, meanings lost in oblivion. Rather than seeing this as a serious impediment to research, I propose treating it as part and parcel of the subject: as something that covers its individual details in darkness, but brightly illuminates its core nature. The early Communist movement in Hungary was fraught by antagonism and conspiratorial silence, influencing what we can read about in sources and what we will never find written down. In the age of state Socialism, interwar Communism constituted a seminal memory site, and its story was told along the lines of official narratives, themselves changing as the decades passed. Finally, after 1989, interpretations changed, often into their complete opposite. The Soviet Republic and the interwar Communist movement became pieces of a difficult heritage that is rarely talked about; a site of forgetting, rather than a site of memory.

The most important primary source on the creative process is Viktória Derkovits's account. According to her, at Christmas 1929 Derkovits had enthusiastically explained to the comrades how he had conceived of each image, one by one.⁵¹ It is a shame that Viktória did not record these explanations, but her memoirs were written in the early 1950s, in the totalitarian phase of the Hungarian Communist regime. In the interwar period, Trianon could be seen as an example of capitalist imperialism, so revisionism could be fashioned as a Communist cause, but after 1948 the official view was that the territorial conflicts between states in the Socialist Bloc had now been solved by Communist internationalism. This approach was embraced by the Communist leadership, among them Révai, now a powerful functionary.⁵² Hence, Trianon was not a subject that could be discussed freely.⁵³ In this period, Derkovits's art raised a degree of suspicion, and Viktória's goal was to prove his Communist credentials. If she knew anything about the revisionist aspect, she would have kept it to herself.

The infighting did not end with the Communist turn, but those on the losing side could now be cracked down on using the full power of the state. Lukács, for instance, came to be publicly denounced in 1949–1950 in the 'Lukács debate', essentially an academic show trial. The *Blum Theses* could not be published in full until 1975, and even then only with a foreword that warned about the 'incorrectness' of some of their conclusions.⁵⁴ In such a climate, discussing the exact circumstances in which *1514* was commissioned and produced would have evoked uncomfortable moments from the past. An interesting result of this situation is the disconnect between Viktória Derkovits's account and subsequent scholarship: the former, while reticent, still reveals some specific names; the latter, in turn, tentatively proposes further names, while mostly ignoring those provided by Viktória. Today, it is impossible to tell how far the widow's discussion of the events of 1928–1929 was influenced by the oppressive milieu of the 1950s. One recent monograph casts serious doubt on her credibility, claiming that she

51. Derkovits, *Mi ketten*, p. 93.

52. On Révai and Trianon after 1945, see Ádám Szesztay, 'Révai József', in Ignác Romsics (ed.), *Trianon és a magyar politikai gondolkodás 1920–1953* [*Trianon and Hungarian Political Thought*] (Budapest: Osiris, 1998), pp. 225–35.

53. See Zsuzsa L. Nagy, 'Trianon a magyar társadalom tudatában' ['Trianon in the Consciousness of Hungarian Society'], in Zeidler (ed.), *Trianon*, pp. 843–5.

54. Lukács, 'Téziservezet'. Excerpts from the *Theses* had already been published in 1956, the year of temporary thawing that culminated in the Revolution.

55. Molnos, *Derkovits: Szemben a világgal*, pp. 45–7.

56. Büki, 'The Past Is Still Present'.

57. For this article, I conducted extensive research in the Archives of the Institute of Political History, Budapest, to examine documents produced by the Hungarian Communist Party around 1928–30, but this did not yield any new references to Derkovits or *1514*.

may have made up the whole story about their involvement in the movement, as well as the role of the comrades in the production of *1514*, in order to construct a polished narrative fit for the 1950s.⁵⁵ Subsequent research, however, unearthed a number of previously unexamined sources that corroborated many of the details related by Viktória, including, for instance, the flat rented by the Party for the couple.⁵⁶ Hence, although the lack of other sources confirming Viktória's account of the creation of *1514* is certainly notable, I believe that complete mistrust is unwarranted.⁵⁷ As demonstrated above, Viktória's account fits very well with other contemporaneous events in the Hungarian Communist Party; furthermore, given that Lukács had been disgraced since 1950, while Révai had also been denounced as 'despotic' and stripped of his power in June 1953, she was not even building up her storyline in the most beneficial way possible. Nevertheless, it is right to exercise a degree of caution: anything written about the interwar years in the 1950s bore the heavy marks of the memory politics of a hardline dictatorship.

By the 1970s, the regime softened considerably, and disagreements between different branches of the interwar Communist movement could become the objects of serious historical study. After decades of silence, it became possible to explore Communist attitudes to nationalism and revisionism. Studies by scholars such as László Kővágó and Miklós Lackó were still produced in a centrally controlled academic environment, but they were nevertheless thoroughly researched, nuanced, and neutral in their overall tone, and the present essay owes a lot to them. Still, inevitably, there were limits to what they could say. And even with that caveat, they only set up the context around Derkovits's *1514*, but do not reveal the concrete connections.

Insights from 1970s studies of the interwar Communist movement did not make it into art historical scholarship on Derkovits. There are several reasons for this. Perhaps driven by an exhaustion with obligatory Marxist social-historical frameworks, Hungarian art history writing in the last decades of the twentieth century tended to avoid the detailed examination of the historical context of modernist artworks. Instead, the preferred model was to set up a general historical background, and then analyse the formal evolution of the artworks in light of the artist's biography. Furthermore, the second half of the twentieth century saw the entrenchment of an association between modernist art and progressive, left-wing politics. This narrative is present in art history writing internationally, but it was especially influential in the post-Stalinist phase of state Socialism: for art historians, emphasising the left-wing credentials of modern and avant-garde artists helped rescue them from accusations of 'bourgeois formalism', while cultural politics could present them as examples of a modern, yet ideologically acceptable art. Tainting the reputation of artists such as Derkovits with assumptions of nationalism would have confused this glorifying narrative, and for an oppressive regime that still liked to present things as black and white such nuance was to be avoided at all costs. In such a milieu, it is possible that the revisionist layers of Derkovits's *1514* were noticed but never mentioned. It is, however, more likely that such self-censorship was unnecessary, because the perspective of the time hindered the observation itself.

In the years around 1989, Hungarian politics, society, and public life underwent a fundamental transformation, but not everything changed. The association of modern and avant-garde art with leftism and of leftism with anti-nationalism lived on in art criticism. Framing things as black and white – left-wing ideology as detrimental to the national community, or an interest in Hungarian minorities outside the borders as necessarily right-wing nationalist – still serves political aims. In a culture fraught by such tensions, at a time when pre-1989

cultural icons are seen as unfashionable on virtually all sides of the political spectrum, can art provide a way towards a more nuanced memory politics? The 2014 exhibition's reading of Derkovits's compositions as 'pictorial essays', rather than propagandistic statements, revealed a complexity that had been obscured by his reputation as the model Communist artist. In this vein, the message of *1514* is not merely 'Twentieth-century workers are exploited just like peasants in the sixteenth century'. Instead, the work raises a range of issues that preoccupied leading Communists, as well as the working class, in interwar Hungary: oppression, police brutality, the role of the church, the place of peasants in the workers' movement, and – inevitably – the Treaty of Trianon.

58. A model-like example of such an approach is Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary*.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Gyula Derkovits's series of woodcuts *1514* fed into debates about the Treaty of Trianon unfolding in the Hungarian Communist Party around 1929. There are no explicit primary sources to support this, but there is a range of circumstantial evidence. This might seem an esoteric piece of art historical knowledge about an artwork familiar to Hungarians but virtually unknown everywhere else. As a case study, however, it encapsulates important general conclusions about cultural memory, art historical research, and uncomfortable pasts. The interwar Communist movement's controversial relationship with revisionism, its attempts to harness anti-Trianon sentiment in the service of its own cause, had been suppressed so successfully by subsequent politics of memory that it barely registers in the collective memory of Hungarian society, but this image had preserved it, hiding it in plain sight until its lessons became meaningful again.

In today's Hungary, Trianon is still a heated issue that can be exploited for political gain, but – at least outside the official sphere – discussions about it can be more multifaceted than before 1989. Recent historical research has added a lot of nuance to our understanding of the politics and everyday culture of revisionism, and it is now possible to view Trianon as an issue that spanned across the political spectrum, while also highlighting how it became a central driving force in right-wing radicalisation.⁵⁸ The subdued voices of the past, preserved by artworks such as *1514*, can finally be heard, questioning the convenient view according to which nationalism has nothing to do with the left. This is where *1514* speaks to our present historical moment, and not just in Hungary. Nationalist issues can be important to potential left-wing voters, but is it possible to address these without propping up right-wing narratives? It is tempting to exploit them for political gain, but this leads to a slippery slope – not engaging with them, however, can be seen as ignoring political reality. If the left employs them in its politics, can it claim innocence if the outcome is right-wing radicalisation? Is it possible to rebrand nationalist issues as left-wing ones? Can ideas such as the Communist Party's internationalist revisionism become more than intellectual abstractions, or are they 'iron hoops made of wood', as the Hungarian saying has it? The story of *1514*, with its silences, gaps, its many unknowns, does not provide definitive answers to these questions. The story of why those silences arose, however, is a poignant reminder of why the questions are still uncomfortable today.

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