

The Workers' State: Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944–1958. By Mark Pittaway. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. ix + 386 pp.

Who dares to say that the emperor has no clothes, and if you do, what consequences can you expect? How does a system craft legitimacy, and where are the limits of power? How did the Communist Party in Hungary manage to win, in addition to the support of Soviet tanks, the support of a significant proportion of the Hungarian population, without actually having to use force in every case? How did they manage to convince people of the myth that the Communists were building the best of all possible worlds, the workers' state, and how did they shatter this very myth? Mark Pittaway, a historian who staked out his place in Hungarian and international historiography as a legal scholar dealing first and foremost with the working class of the socialist era (and who died tragically young), seeks answers to these important questions.

The posthumously published monograph by Mark Pittaway (1971–2010)<sup>1</sup> is the result of fifteen years of research. I first met Pittaway in 1995 in the Trade Union Archives in Rózsa Street, Budapest. He was sitting behind a wall of boxes containing documents and studying innumerable piles of dusty papers. After having completed his bachelor's thesis on Venice at the time of the Renaissance, he entered the doctoral program at the University of Liverpool, where he pursued an interest in the history of the working class in Hungary. For many people working in or around the archives in the Hungarian countryside, this Englishman was something of an exotic rarity. He was one of the few non-Hungarian historians who learned Hungarian to a high degree of proficiency and, after having read the relevant Hungarian secondary literature, did original research in archives very far from the beaten track. His monograph is based on a remarkable wealth of sources and his pioneering manner of approaching the subject does a great deal to compensate for methodological lacunae in the secondary literature. But his contribution is valuable first and foremost because of the model he adopts, which rejects the totalitarian paradigm (which has become so prevalent in contemporary historiography), a model he was among

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<sup>1</sup> The book was already in preparation at the time of Pittaway's death. The final revisions and editing, without which it could not have been published, were done by Nigel Swain.

the first to introduce with his narrative of the history of the Hungarian working class in 1944–1958.

The essence of this model lies in the fact that the totalitarian state, which in general is depicted as omnipresent and omnipotent, is merely one of the agents of history, and one the tools of which are in fact surprisingly limited. From the perspective of legitimacy, the attendants of the system (ranging from the secretary general to the average party member) influenced the prevailing attitudes towards the state (whether it wins acceptance or not) no more than the masses who, in the totalitarian paradigm, are depicted—misleadingly—as powerless and oppressed. In Pittaway’s narrative the process of the creation of the socialist state is one of the most important questions, and it is closely intertwined with the question of how the authorities prompted or persuaded Hungarian society to accept the new rules on which the system rested.

The question of the treatment of the working class became one of the most important elements of the legitimacy of the Communist Party after World War II, very much like the use of nationalist rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Pittaway considers it important to note that the socialist system itself never gained legitimacy (p.4). Yet many of the motifs of the creation of the socialist state were accepted, and they gave some legitimacy to a system that used force. Furthermore, the possibility of the use of force became a norm in many cases. In other words while the socialist regime was not necessarily seen as legitimate, neither was it seen as diabolically evil by many, however unpleasant this may be to admit in hindsight.

The monograph cautiously (sometimes overcautiously) guides the reader through the story of the creation by Communist politicians who enjoyed minimal support of a party of the masses that had palpable support among workers, to the detriment of the Social Democratic Party. And later, as a dramatic continuation of the story, the same politicians rapidly lost this support on the national and local levels when they began to create the “workers’ state” (to which Pittaway refers ironically in his title) by introducing “the building of the socialist system,” the “rationalization” of production, and the system of quotas. After 1956, in the new social climate, the regime under the leadership of János Kádár was again compelled to use tools to win legitimacy, since it was not possible to work and wield power in everyday life with minimal support in the shadow of tanks or at

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2 Cf. Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: the Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941–1953* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

“gun point.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast, according to the totalitarian paradigm, the state used, first and foremost, force to exert its power over workers in heavy industry. In 1956 Hungarian society (especially the workers) rose up against the regime, and this was met with new repressive measures.<sup>4</sup> The totalitarian paradigm suggests, inaccurately, that no one in the large industrial cities voted for the Communists of his or her own volition in 1945 and 1947 and that no one was in fact a party member. It suggests that the Communist idiom was used by members of society only as a response to the orders of the regime and only by people who sought in ever larger numbers to promote their own individual interests.

Pittaway’s approach is refreshing not only because of its novelty in comparison with the totalitarian paradigm, but also because it sheds light (on the national and local level) on the process whereby the Communist Party managed, through the use of populist rhetoric, to gain credibility and then to lose it entirely. The new system after 1956 owed its relative stability not only to the Soviet tanks, but also the “subjects” who as agents of history themselves influenced the rules of the game in everyday life. It is particularly worthwhile to emphasize the interpretation of 1956 according to which, from the perspective of the politicians involved, the Revolution can be seen as an attempt to gain legitimacy, and not simply as an uprising. From this perspective the motives and the roles played by Communist politicians in 1956 are more comprehensible, as are the functions of the workers’ councils as negotiators in the course of the reprisals and the consolidation of the Kádár system. In this story, the workers’ councils were not bastions of a self-organized revolutionary force that was realizing self-government among workers,<sup>5</sup> but rather the vehicles of an attempt to further the legitimacy of the Kádár regime, an attempt initiated both from above and below. Thus they offer a perspective from which to discern the consolidation of the Kádár system not simply from below, but also from the viewpoint of the negotiations and compromises that were made at the local level. In Pittaway’s

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3 See Gyula Kozák and Adrienne Molnár, eds., “*Szuronyok hegyén nem lehet dolgozni!*”: válogatás 1956-os munkástanács-vezetők visszaemlékezéseiből [“You Can Not Work at Gun-Point!”: A Selection from the Memoires of Leaders of the 1956 Workers’ Councils] (Budapest: Századvég–1956-os Intézet, 1993).

4 Cf. Gyula Belényi, *Az állam szorításában: az ipari munkásság társadalmi átalakulása Magyarországon, 1945–1965* [In the Vice of the State: The Social Transformation of the Industrial Working Class in Hungary, 1944–1965] (Szeged: Belvedere Meridionale, 2009).

5 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958); Bill Lomax, ed., *Hungarian Workers’ Councils in 1956* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs, 1990); Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956* (London: Allen and Busby, 1976); Tamás Krausz, “Az 1956-os munkástanácsokról” [On the 1956 Workers’ Councils], *Eszmélet* 18, no. 72 (Winter 2006): 32–38.

narrative, they have a similar function to the trade union committees of 1945: their stories shed light on how the new system was able to win acceptance on the shop floor. In this interpretation, the trade union committees and the workers' councils did not represent "union democracy" or "workers' self-government." Rather, the Communists used them to promote acceptance of their goals among workers in heavy industry in 1945 and the fall of 1956.

There is a long tradition of historical and sociological scholarship on workers in heavy industry in Hungary.<sup>6</sup> Though the subject has not been given much attention among scholars since the change of regimes in 1989, over the course of the last decade more and more historians have begun to study it in part because of the influence of Pittaway's contribution.<sup>7</sup> His was not the first such study to examine the endeavors of the Communists to win legitimacy among workers in the region.<sup>8</sup> Pittaway continuously reflects on the theses that can be found in the international secondary literature on the subject, and his monograph reinterprets and enlarges on the conclusions of E. P. Thompson's fundamental work on the creation of the English working class.<sup>9</sup> He is thoroughly familiar with the subject, as evidenced by the fact that he wrote a separate comparative volume on the social history of the socialist bloc that has become obligatory reading at universities throughout the world and one of the best summaries of

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6 Miklós Lackó, *Ipari munkásságunk összetételének alakulása. 1867–1949* [The Transformation of the Composition of our Industrial Working Class] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1961); György Litván, ed., *Magyar munkásszociográfiák* [Hungarian Workers' Sociographies] (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1974); István Kemény, *Velük nevelkedett a gép* [The Machine was Reared with Them] (Budapest: Művelődéskutató Intézet, 1990); Gábor Gyáni, *Bérműgyárak és nyomortelep: a budapesti munkáslakás múltja* [Tenement Building and Slum: The History of Workers' Lodgings in Budapest] (Budapest: Magvető, 1992); László Varga, *Az elhagyott tömeg: tanulmányok 1950–1956-ról* [The Abandoned Crowd: Studies on 1950–1956] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi–Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 1994).

7 Belényi, *Az állam szorításában*; Sándor Horváth, László Pethő and Eszter Zsófia Tóth, *Munkástörténet, munkásantropológia* [Labor History, Labor Anthropology] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2003); Eszter Zsófia Tóth, "Puszi Kádár Jánosnak": *munkásnők élete a Kádár-korszakban mikrotörténeti megközelítésben* ["Kisses for János Kádár": The Lives of Working Women in the Kádár Era, from the Perspective of a Micro-historical Analysis] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2007); the special issue "Labor of Postwar Central and Eastern Europe" of the journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* 68, Fall (2005); and among the most recent works: Eszter Bartha, *Alienating Labour: Workers on the Road from Socialism to Capitalism in East Germany and Hungary* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

8 Two important works that influenced Pittaway in his choice of topics: Alf Lüdtke: *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitserfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*. (Hamburg: Ergebnisse-Verlag, 1993); Pdraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

9 Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963).

the postwar history of the region.<sup>10</sup> He boldly and confidently transgresses the borders established by political history. For instance, in his assessment in many of the social processes in Eastern Europe World War II did not constitute a caesura, and he traces with similar confidence the threads of continuity and discontinuity in the social history of the working class. According to Pittaway, 1945, 1948, and 1956 constituted pivotal moments only to the extent that they prompted changes in the political views of the workers of *Újpest, Tatabánya*, or *Zala* County. Thus, paradoxically his book also examines how the Kádár system came into being, the antecedents to it, and the processes whereby it was able to consolidate its power (and from this perspective 1945 and 1947 were as much antecedents as 1953).

Pittaway does not attempt to establish consensus in the debates regarding the debates on modernization,<sup>11</sup> nor does he bother attempting to reconcile the oppositions of the “movements” of “political” and “social history”. He puts these debates in parentheses. He examines simply the fluctuating legitimacy of the Communists and the system and the ways in which actors at various levels of power and in various social spaces influenced one another. The subject at hand (political support, or lack thereof) can be understood as political history, but in the course of his study Pittaway uses all of the methods and sources that a social or cultural historian would use.

The task Pittaway sets for himself is not easy. Even the question of the precise meaning of the term legitimacy can be problematic, not to mention the issue of how one can use sources that for the most part were produced by the regime itself to assess the amount of support it actually had in the factories. For this reason, the study of the limits of power and the various forms of support requires new tools. Anyone who knew Pittaway may well be surprised by the methodological rigor with which he constructs his narrative. He read an enormous amount about the living conditions and everyday lives of the working class in Hungary, but the reader can glimpse this vast knowledge only through the very small, carefully selected stories he provides. A serious task demands a serious scholar. The monograph is not the work of Mark, who loved to recount captivating stories of the working class, but rather Pittaway, the highly disciplined scholar, who writes with none of the irony or humor so distinctive of Mark. It

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10 Mark Pittaway, *Eastern Europe 1939–2000* (London: Arnold, 2004).

11 Michael David-Fox, “Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism. On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54 (2006): 535–55.

is a dramatic story without catharsis in which every anecdote has an important function.

The form of the narrative, which is told chronologically and is set in three different industrial(izing) settlements (Újpest, Tatabánya and Zala county), enables Pittaway to portray the reactions of the workers as rational. At the beginning of each chapter he describes the political context in Hungary, which presumably is largely unfamiliar to the average non-Hungarian reader, and then goes into the “depths,” the factories and the workshop floors. Újpest, which had a long history as an industrialized settlement, Tatabánya, which had grown administratively to absorb nearby mining colonies and had been elevated to the status of a city, and Zala county (and within Zala county the area around the city of Letenye), which had only begun to serve as a home to the oil industry but was otherwise largely dependent on agriculture, provide in and of themselves an opportunity for comparison. As the narrative progresses, it seems to have a diverse array of implications, and the theses are so logical that at times it is almost disquieting.

The differences between imagined industrial workers (the notion of the worker as used in the idiom crafted by the Communists) and real industrial workers are always present in Pittaway’s analyses. He cites a 1958 report of a party committee to make these differences palpable. At the dawn of the Kádár era, when, given the significant rise in wages and the arrests, hardly anyone in the factories in the city would have considered going on strike, Lajos Kelemen, a party secretary in Kőbánya,<sup>12</sup> openly contended—no doubt to the astonishment of many—that the emperor had no clothes, for the workers, the workers’ state was alas not the best of all possible worlds. “Part of the working class simply doesn’t agree with us. They just do not accept this system.” (p.14) His words were recorded, and they were met with replies. But Kelemen was not punished, rather his statement was used to further the consolidation of the new system. For a time the king acknowledged that he had no clothes, which considerably increased his credibility. The legitimacy of the Kádár system rested to a great extent on its efforts to distance itself from the Rákosi regime, which from the perspective of the hardships faced by the industrial working class meant that after 1956 the origins of every problem were traced back to the early 1950s. Indeed it may well have seemed that Kádár himself had risen to power in order to break with the past and see that justice be done.

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12 Kőbánya was a traditionally industrial district of Budapest.

The first chapter of the book begins in March 1944 with the occupation of the country by the German army and narrates the case studies that took place in the three regions up until November 1945, examining what the workers themselves sought (primarily stability) and what they were given or at least hoped to be given by the Communists (and this differed in each of the three areas). Pittaway's approach sheds light on methodological problems as well, since the historian is compelled to reply for the most part on the minutes of party meetings, official reports regarding the prevailing mood (*hangulatjelentés*), and newspaper articles when drawing conclusions—tentatively—on the expectations of workers. In any event Újpest seems to have been the only place—and not because of the Újpest partisans (p.31)—where communism was not perceived simply as an exotic import brought by the Soviet army. In the case of Tatabánya, in contrast, Pittaway traces the first successes of the Communists back to the power vacuum left after the fall of the Arrow Cross. In Zala, a county consisting largely of small villages that had been particularly hard hit by the pillaging of the Soviet soldiers, the Communist Party had little chance of any similar attainments. A picture begins to emerge of the workers as a class that was politically active during the war. Disinterest in politics was rare among workers who, some decades later, would sometimes have to explain to their descendants what the word “strike” meant (though it's true that in the meantime workers had found other means of holding back production).<sup>13</sup> The book offers illuminating comparisons of why the Communist rhetoric, which hammered in the notion that the Communists had arrived as liberators, was received differently in each of the three places in question and how the workers' strikes in the summer and autumn of 1945, soon before the elections, influenced people's assessments of the party.

According to Pittaway, the elections that were held in November 1945 shattered the Communists' illusion that they would rise to power without any kind of transition and with the backing of the Soviets. After the elections, the Communist Party was compelled to make proposals to the working class that would help it win their support. However, whether or not a political party enjoyed support depended not on the promises it made, but rather on its credibility. The results of the 1947 elections were more favorable for the Communists specifically because they found themselves in the opposition in 1945. The voters

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13 Cf. Lajos Héthy and Csaba Makó, *Munkásmagatartások és gazdasági szervezet* [Worker Behavior and Economic Organization] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972).

of Tatabánya or Újpest did not have more faith in the Communists because the Communists had made enticing promises, but rather because the governing parties, which had a penchant for populist pledges, were not able to make good on their promises. On the local level, members of the social democratic party were seen as people who were close to the institutions of power (pp.67–8). This enabled the Communist Party to win considerable support in industrial districts in 1947. Pittaway does not explain this as a consequence of national political developments. He does not characterize the period between 1945 and 1948 as an attempt to create a state founded on the rule of law, but rather as years in which the Communists used populist tools to attempt to win support for their goals among a segment of society. In his assessment, the decisions of voters were influenced by local experiences and circumstances on the shop floor (rises in wages, a strike, a local demonstration, for instance on May 1, 1946 in Újpest, when the Hungarian Communist Party and the Hungarian Socialist Democratic Party together managed to mobilize 25,000 people). At the same time, there is still room for further research. Pittaway analyzes the election data on smaller settlements, but he does not attempt to explain why the differences were so striking between individual villages (in the case of the county of Zala) and parts of the city (in the case of Tatabánya). As is the case with the results of the 1947 elections, these differences cannot be explained simply as a result of voter fraud.

The third chapter (which examines the period between 1947 and 1949) may well give rise to numerous differences of opinion among Hungarian historians who are debating the significance of 1949, a year often regarded as a turning point. The title of the chapter (*Social Roots of Dictatorship*) is in itself provocative, since it implies that the dictatorship was not simply an aberrance that was concocted in the witch's kitchen of the Communist Party and imposed by the Soviets. Pittaway examines the measures that were taken in order to win some social support in the course of the creation of the dictatorship. Through the use of populist rhetoric, the party managed to gain acceptance for the appointment of workers' directors and the nationalization of factories (which according to the Communists had been ruthlessly exploited by the capitalists and had finally found trustworthy caregivers in the state) without even having to rely on the State Security, effectively the secret police (pp.86–8). One could mention, for instance, the "potato crisis" in Tatabánya, which involved a strike that broke out in Tatabánya because of the shortage of potatoes (which in the 1950s were one of the primary foodstuffs). In the course of the strike the local organization of the Hungarian Communist Party blamed "speculators" (implicitly "Jewish



speculators”) for the shortage. With nationalization and this anti-Semitic rhetoric, the Hungarian Communist Party managed to gain significant support in Tatabánya.

This political popularity disappeared rapidly, however, when the workers found themselves in the world not of visions and promises, but rather of economic measures adopted by a party, the Communist Party, that found itself compelled to increase economic efficiency. On the level of the factory floors, the greatest conflict was caused by the introduction of a system of wages based on the Soviet model, which on the local level meant the end of populist communism (though it did not prevent the reproduction of class hierarchy). A mining accident in Tatabánya on December 30, 1950 that was caused indirectly by measures taken to increase production had a permanent effect on attitudes towards the Rákosi system in the community (p.130). The most interesting and most valuable parts of the book are Pittaway’s analyses of the similarities and differences between the three areas, Újpest, Tatabánya and Zala. He reveals differences in micro-communities that for the most part would remain indistinct, homogenous masses in macro-analyses, for instance the industrial working class itself, the different layers of which have been ascribed with varying significances in the creation of the socialist system.

László Varga and Gyula Belényi have already studied the conflicts between the “new,” “transitional” workers<sup>14</sup> (rural, young, often female) and the old, trained workers in Hungary.<sup>15</sup> Pittaway’s monograph, however, is the first work of scholarship to examine how, after 1956, the Kádár government was compelled because of these conflicts to establish legitimacy for itself in an entirely new social milieu, as well as the tools it used in the service of this goal. Pittaway touches on sensitive questions. The workers of Újpest who on October 23, 1956 radicalized the demonstration by the youth (p.209) and later took active part in the organization of the workers’ councils were among the first to be given raises in 1957. In 1957 workers’ wages were increased by 18 percent (p.233), although this in and of itself was not adequate to ensure support for the Kádár system among a significant segment of the working class. According to Pittaway, the answer to the question of why the government was not compelled on May 1

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14 On the “transitional types of workers” see László Pethő, “A vidéki munkásság antropológiája” [An Anthropology of the Rural Working Class], in *Paraszti múlt és jelen az ezredfordulón* [Peasant Past and Present at the Turn of the Millennium], ed. Miklós Cseri, László Kósa, and Ibolya T. Bereczki (Szentendre: Magyar Néprajzi Társaság–Szentendrei Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2000), 423–42.

15 Belényi, *Az állam szorításában*; Varga, *Az elhagyott tömeg*.

to use the workers' militia to get workers to participate in the parades and why János Kádár himself did not fear an attempt on his life during the celebrations lies in the shrewd mix of the official rhetoric and a politics focused on standards of living.

Mark Pittaway's monograph occupies a place of distinction not only in the scholarship on the political engagement of the industrial workers in Hungary, but in the research on the history of the industrial workers in Europe. It situates the attempt to create Socialism in Hungary in an international context and thus provides a point of departure for further comparative study. Pittaway's research, work that spanned a decade and a half, has revitalized scholarship on the subject, which had been increasingly marginalized in the historiography.<sup>16</sup> In all likelihood his monograph will influence research on the lives and experiences of industrial workers, who represented the largest social bloc and whose living conditions should therefore be in the forefront of scholarship on the era, for decades.

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16 See the special issue of the *International Review of Social History*. Marcel van der Linden, ed., *The End of Labour History?* 38, no. 1 (1993).