

Luxury and the Ruling Elite in Socialist Hungary: Villas, Hunts, and Soccer Games. By György Majtényi. Translated by Thomas Cooper. Studies in Hungarian History Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. 366 pp.

György Majtényi begins *Luxury and the Ruling Elite in Socialist Hungary* with an account of a birthday gathering for an apparatchik on the Csákberény estate in 1946. Guests dined on caviar, wild boar, and stuffed goose, fine wine was poured from crystal pitchers, women wore the latest fashions, and an accordionist named Andy played Horthy-era revanchist hits such as “Prague is not far from the border” (pp.13–14). Clearly, the leaders of the party-state knew how to party, and as this and scores of other accounts in this idiosyncratic narrative reveal, they did so in a manner that resembled the noble and bourgeois lifestyles of the prewar past far more than the “socialist culture” espoused by József Révai and the other party ideologues.

*Luxury and the Ruling Elite* takes the reader on a dizzying tour of the lifestyles of the rich and famous in socialist Hungary. The ruling elite enjoyed villas in the Buda hills, access to automobiles, specialized health care, travel abroad (with the added benefit of providing opportunities for deals on the black market), and an array of other perks made possible by their preeminent position. Underpinning these luxuries is the common theme of continuity with the past and engagement with the West: “There was no abrupt rift between the lifestyles of the social classes and the elite under socialism on the one hand and the customs of the prewar period and consumer cultures of the West on the other” (p.299). To take just two examples, automobiles were status symbols that clearly delineated one’s rank in the social hierarchy: initially, party functionaries had to make do with Škodas and Pobedas, but by the 1950s, higher-ranking members had access to BMWs and Chevrolets. By the 1970s, the Mercedes 280 was “all the rage” among the party elite, with Volvos second best (but still popular, as evinced by a wave of “Volvoism”) (pp.66–71).

Tradition and hierarchy were also apparent in hunting circles, as the Concord Hunting Society admitted only top-ranking members of the ruling elite; second-rank cadres had to settle for membership in the Friendship Hunting Society. Members of the ruling elite hunted on the same grounds shot the same expensive guns, and in some cases employed the same personnel as their prewar counterparts, as “the old hunting experts could use their knowledge and

know-how to blackmail the powerful figures of the era.” The bonds formed by hunting—as a form of recreation, of creating and developing social relationships, and perpetuating hegemonic masculinity—bridged the gap between Horthy-era elites and their new rulers, as evinced by the continued popularity of “Comrade Count Zsigmond Széchenyi” and other former nobles (pp.116–24, 130). Even in death, the socialist elite laid claim to membership in the Hungarian tradition, as the Pantheon of the Workers’ Movement in Kerepesi Cemetery was erected in 1959 amidst the mausoleums and monuments of historical figures ranging from Lajos Batthyány and Lajos Kossuth to interwar ministers such as Gyula Gömbös and Pál Teleki (pp.89–90). Amid all this excess and luxury, only János Kádár himself seems to have been immune to the siren song of conspicuous consumption, portraying himself as a simple man with simple tastes and habits and the “veritable trustee of consolidation,” much as Miklós Horthy had before him (pp.296–97). Although Majtényi does not address the modern post-socialist elite at any length, its few appearances in this book—most notably again at Kerepesi, with the reburial of noteworthy figures appropriated from the past, such as poet Attila József, to join new heroes such as József Antall, even as unwanted leaders of the socialist period were interned in the more humble Farkasrét Cemetery (pp.93–94)—suggest that this elite will continue the tradition of borrowing and reinventing the elite lifestyles (and deathstyles) of its predecessors.

Majtényi’s decade of experience as the Department Head of the Hungarian National Archive is apparent in his command and judicious use of archival sources, and he weaves them together with memoirs, interviews, publications in the popular press, and a diverse range of other sources in this book. Majtényi’s expository style may strike some readers as odd, as he deliberately eschews a more conventional historiographical and narrative praxis for what he defines as a contextual historical essay rooted in satire and irony. *Pace* Hayden White, Majtényi argues that “History can be understood as a kind of delicate ‘embroidery.’ We can only unstitch the fabric if we are able to follow the underlying threads and the underlying design, and it is only worth unraveling if we examine how things are intertwined” (p.8). The best example of this unraveling of skeins of social status, political power, symbolism, and performativity is found at the beginning of Chapter 4, dedicated to football (“soccer” to Americans) culture in the 1950s. Majtényi argues that the ruling elite was able to generate legitimacy by coopting football culture: the victories of the new teams with class-conscious origins and especially the international success of the Golden Team of the mid-1950s reinforced the regime’s claim to represent working-class mass culture. For their

part, skilled footballers were one of the few social groups with any hope of upward mobility: victories led to expensive gifts and privileges and, more importantly, enabled their participation in the black market with goods smuggled home from international events. (Ironically, the Stakhanovites—exemplary workers who overfulfilled quotas—were for the most part hung out to dry once their immediate propaganda value had run out (pp.190–98).) However, this symbolic linkage did not always operate in the regime’s favor, as the defeat of the Golden Team on July 4, 1954, led to riots in the streets: “The party leadership had done everything to ensure the masses would attribute the successes of the team to the system, and now the protesters were looking for the people who could be held responsible for what they viewed as a humiliating fiasco” (pp.180). Majtényi goes on to intimate that these protests may have served as a dress rehearsal, or at least a dry run, for 1956, and it is here that his essayist approach arguably falls short. While the protesters in 1954 were doubtless motivated by anger over the Golden Team’s loss, by that time they had many other issues with communist rule, and after the advent of the New Course and its reforms in 1953, the regime seemed both weaker and more responsive to workers’ needs as consumers as well as subjects. Likewise, Majtényi also does not directly address the 1968 New Economic Mechanism that enabled the rise of “goulash communism” in Hungary. He notes that in the 1960s and 1970s “the dress habits of the elite actually became more staid and conservative,” as they “turned back towards more traditional models,” (p.255) but he identifies this as an elite response to changes in Western fashion rather than a reaction to the overall improvement in the amount and types of consumption (both Western and domestic) now more available to the masses. In these two cases, Majtényi’s focus on the lives of elites occludes the broader historical trend towards consumerism. These are not major shortcomings, and they do not significantly detract from the book’s eclectic appeal described above. While *Luxury and the Ruling Elite* was not written for a general audience, it belongs on the reading list of any serious scholar of culture and communism in Hungary and Europe more broadly.

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