

HUNGARIAN REVIEW

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Cover photo: Pál Kő, Hungarian Messiah, painted wood, copper, glass, 72 × 65 × 18 cm, 1977. Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest. © Márton Borbás

A HUNGARIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE OFFICER IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS

Colonel Nándor Taróczy's Unusual Visit to the Soviet Union

Judit Hammerstein

NÁNDOR TARÓCZY, THE RUSSIAN EXPERT AND INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

Among the Hungarian travellers who visited the Soviet Union between the two world wars, one of the most interesting was undoubtedly Nándor Taróczy.¹ His exceptional position is illustrated by the fact that he travelled not as a writer, artist, or representative of the scholarly world, but as a military intelligence officer who was working under diplomatic cover at the Hungarian legation in Tallinn when he visited the Soviet Union in 1925. Taróczy dealt with the Bolshevik state in an official capacity: in Tallinn and Riga, in addition to performing the traditional duties of a consul, he was tasked with monitoring the Soviet economy as well as Soviet–Baltic and Soviet–German military and political relations. Thanks to his Russian wife, he had a personal understanding of the Russian mentality and, crucially, he had an excellent command of the language. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, he had visited Tsarist Russia on several occasions with his aristocratic wife, so he was by no means lacking in local knowledge.

Alongside Mihály Jungerth-Arnóthy,² he was regarded as one of the foremost experts on the Russia of the period; indeed, by virtue of his training, breadth of knowledge, and abilities, he stood far above the contemporary diplomatic milieu. He spoke six foreign languages, possessed wide-ranging erudition, and displayed outstanding powers of observation. Thanks to his proficiency in languages and extensive network of contacts, he drew his information from a broad range of sources: in addition to his own observations, he could rely on intelligence obtained through his wide diplomatic connections, on reports in the Soviet press, and on specialist literature in foreign languages.

However, he was an unconventional diplomat in other respects as well. He did not always observe the rules of conduct required by the hierarchical relationships that governed the ministry and the foreign service; he formulated his observations and opinions forcefully and without circumlocution, and he supplied his superiors with unsolicited proposals, which aroused their displeasure, antipathy, and presumably even jealousy.

Drawing also on the experiences of his 1925 journey, he expressed in his reports the conviction that Hungary—surrounded by hostile countries and pursuing territorial revision—could most readily find an ally in the east, and should therefore establish diplomatic relations with the Soviets as soon as possible. This proposal, however, earned him the ire of his military and foreign-ministry superiors at home, who took umbrage at the fact that Taróczy was willing to frankly contradict the view then held by his chief, the head of the Tallinn legation, and even call his professional competence into question. The far more cautious Jungerth-Arnóthy initially regarded the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet union as harmful to Hungarian interests. Taróczy's view, however—that the Soviet Union would sooner or later become a serious military great power—also caused consternation at the Ministry of Defence (Taróczy reported to Department VI-2 of the Ministry, that is, to the organizational unit responsible for intelligence and counter-intelligence under the Chief of the General Staff).³ By repeatedly advancing proposals beyond the scope of his authority, Taróczy overstepped his remit, which to his superiors was intolerable. He came to be seen as an awkward and troublesome figure, a development that ultimately led to his being recalled in 1929 and, not long thereafter, relieved of his post and sent into retirement.

Owing to the nature of his work, Taróczy followed developments in the Soviet Union with intense interest, producing demanding, high-quality reports and thorough analyses on the subject. He proceeded from the premise that the strength of the country, as well as its potential for development and the nature and durability of the Bolshevik system, were being misjudged by international observers—a misapprehension that, in his view, also characterized official Hungarian circles. In contrast to reports and opinions predicting imminent collapse, he took the position that the Soviet Union was by no means on the brink of disintegration. Moreover, he believed that the course of its fate would also prove decisive for Hungary's future: 'It is my firm conviction that what is currently taking place in Russia may, in its effects upon us, have consequences a thousand times more significant than anything else occurring in the rest of the world.'⁴

He was likewise convinced that it was impossible to gain a clear, reliable understanding of conditions in the country without first-hand experience on the ground. For this reason, he repeatedly sought permission from his superiors to undertake a study trip to the Soviet Union. In his role as a military intelligence officer, Taróczy was required to produce reports on the Soviet Union, but like contemporary observers more generally, he was continually confronted with the immense difficulty of obtaining and transmitting verifiable information about the country. In his travel account, preserved in manuscript under the title 'Szovjetuniói utazásom. 1925 április–

május' (My Journey in the Soviet Union: April–May 1925), he indignantly states that he himself had read countless fraudulent and worthless reports about developments in the USSR, without their 'charlatan' authors ever having set foot on Soviet soil.⁵

In his fourth summary assessment, however, he also draws attention to another circumstance that makes interpreting the system's true nature an almost impossible undertaking—namely, that the observer is confronted with a Russia in constant motion, in a 'fluid state of aggregation'.⁶

TARÓCZY'S ACCOUNT OF HIS 1925 VISIT TO THE SOVIET UNION

The Circumstances of the Journey

The planned visit ultimately took place in April–May 1925, after Taróczy—thanks to the intervention⁷ of Mikhail Trilisser,⁸ the influential head of the INO, the civilian intelligence branch of the Soviet political police—received the necessary authorization from the Soviets. The circumstances of his departure raise a number of questions. Hungary and the Soviet Union had no official diplomatic relations at that time, yet the Soviets nevertheless granted permission for the visit. Indeed, they permitted the entry of a diplomat who, in his capacity as a specialist officer, was in fact performing military duties. (The Soviets were clearly aware of the cover arrangement.) It is hardly credible that they were moved by the justification stated in Taróczy's visa application—namely, that he and his aristocratic wife wished to visit her family, whom she had long been unable to communicate with. Far more persuasive seems to have been the argument he put to Soviet diplomats in Tallinn, where he justified his intention to travel by stating that the Hungarian leadership lacked adequate knowledge about the Soviet Union.⁹ In the end, Taróczy was granted an entry visa valid for two months.

As a result of the visit, he produced the travel account entitled 'Szovjetuniói utazásom. 1925 április–május' (My Journey in the Soviet Union: April–May 1925). In addition, between 1925 and 1928 Taróczy prepared five further substantial 'summary assessments' on Russia, and wrote two additional analyses under the title 'A Kelet emancipációja Európa gyámsága alól, különös tekintettel Moszkva szerepére' (The Emancipation of the East from Europe's Tutelage: With Particular Regard to Moscow's Role), examining the relationship between the liberation movements of the colonial countries and Soviet foreign policy.¹⁰ These writings are, in fact, not so much reports as extended, carefully crafted studies, which testify equally to Taróczy's thorough preparation and to his keen insight. The author makes extraordinarily interesting observations on, among other



The Moscow Kremlin in 1928. Source: Wikimedia Commons

things, the New Economic Policy (NEP), the national turn taking place within the Red Army, Russian despotism and national character, Lenin and the Communist leaders of the Civil War—the ‘machine-souled’, ‘wire-nerved’, ‘cast-iron monsters’¹¹—internal party strife, and the particular features of Soviet Eastern policy. He writes with wit; his assessments are bold and penetrating, even if some of his prognoses were only partially borne out by events, or not in the manner he envisaged. Where is the Soviet Union heading? In what direction is it developing socially, economically, politically, and militarily? How are its foreign relations being shaped, and by what interests and considerations? What conclusions and practical steps should Hungary draw from all this? These were the questions that primarily preoccupied Taróczy.

His 1925 journey is particularly noteworthy in light of the development of Soviet–Hungarian relations. The bilateral negotiations launched in 1922—primarily on an anti-Romanian basis—concerning the establishment of diplomatic relations had by 1925 stalled. When the Berlin Treaty was signed the previous year, it had still seemed that the establishment of diplomatic missions might soon follow. However, the agreement provoked fierce domestic political storms, and its ratification by the Budapest Parliament ultimately fell through.¹² The Soviet side took this so ill that, in response, it terminated all official negotiations; consequently, contrary to the original plans, Hungarian exports could no longer count on the special concessions

previously promised by the Russians. Nevertheless, this did not preclude a certain degree of cooperation in the field of military intelligence.¹³ A key figure in this cooperation was Colonel Nándor Taróczy, operating behind a diplomatic cover.

Taróczy's travel account, preserved in manuscript form and containing not only descriptions of official meetings but also genuine travelogue elements, is difficult to classify by genre. The colonel's visit was a peculiar blend of private and 'official' travel. (At the time of his departure, Taróczy was still a colonel, though on 1 May 1925 he was promoted to general. For the sake of clarity, in connection with this journey I shall refer to him as Colonel Taróczy.)

While conducting informal discussions with high-ranking Soviet officials, he was also able—with his wife and without Soviet escort—to travel into the provinces, thereby gaining insight into life in the Soviet countryside and in small towns. Thanks to his excellent command of Russian, he was able to converse with ease with the most diverse representatives of Soviet society. It is his two journeys into the hinterland of the USSR, together with his account of Moscow, that make his work of a piece of travel literature; indeed, these sections make up the greater part of the text. Yet since they nevertheless formed part of a non-public foreign ministry report, certain typical features of (especially literary) travel writing—such as references to Russian literature, landscape descriptions, ethnographic observations, and the like—are absent. Taróczy's breadth of knowledge is beyond dispute; at the same time, he does not come across as an intellectual with a background in the humanities. As a soldier performing diplomatic and intelligence duties, his interest was focused on internal political power relations, foreign policy and military intentions, economic trends, and so forth. He does not concern himself with the landscape, the arts, or the situation of the Soviet intelligentsia; nor did he cultivate connections with intellectual circles in the arts—in short, he was not particularly curious about the kinds of matters that especially preoccupied travelling intellectuals and writers. Given the nature of the report and the intention behind its composition—after all, it was politically motivated material—he shows caution and restraint in the presentation of private experiences. We gain no insight into genuinely personal impressions; for instance, we learn nothing directly about the author's wife.

With a travel permit issued by the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Taróczy and his wife boarded a train to the Soviet Union in mid-April 1925. Unlike many contemporary travellers, he makes no complaint whatsoever about the circumstances of the journey. He notes that the bed linen was impeccably clean and that lunch on the train was excellent and inexpensive. Looking out of the window, he is greeted by an encouraging

sight: there is no trace of the destructive effects of the First World War or the Russian Civil War—the bridges are in good condition and the fields are well tended. From the numerous antennae visible in the villages, he concludes that the countryside is developing—almost everyone, it seems, already owns a radio set.¹⁴

At the Latvian border crossing, Taróczy refrains even from voicing displeasure at the extraordinarily thorough customs inspection, which lasted three hours, though condemnation of the oppressive experience of crossing the border is an almost universal element of travel accounts from Russia. At the same time, he gives voice to what he calls a lack of Soviet ‘discretion’ with regard to ordinary citizens, when he notices that a list posted at the station on the border publicly displays the literacy status of those working there. One railway employee, classified as illiterate, is understandably outraged by this public exposure.¹⁵

Arriving in Moscow, he notes that the city has changed little since his most recent visit in 1913: the double-headed eagle and the old Tsarist coats of arms still remain on the bastions of the Kremlin. In the streets he sees considerable traffic, which is a mixture of horse-drawn cabs and automobiles. He conveys the atmosphere of fear with a reference to the Communist militiamen responsible for maintaining order: people are afraid of them, since for the slightest trifle they may denounce or arrest anyone.¹⁶

The Negotiations

Taróczy also gives a lengthy account of his ‘official’ Moscow programme. He was able to take part in several informal meetings concerning bilateral relations—and was received by individuals of relatively high rank and important positions. According to his account, during the negotiations he repeatedly impressed upon his interlocutors that he had arrived in the Soviet Union as a private individual and that the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no knowledge of his visit. He also maintained that he possessed no information whatsoever about the Berlin negotiations. It is hardly credible, of course, that the Soviets took such remarks seriously even for a moment. From both the substance and the tone of the meetings it is perfectly clear that they were negotiating with him as a high-ranking Hungarian military intelligence officer, through whom they intended to convey messages to the Hungarian government. Everyone was fully aware of who was who. Taróczy’s protestations were more likely part of the rhetoric of negotiation and were essentially addressed to the leadership of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. Presumably Colonel Taróczy had received instructions from his superiors to gather information in Moscow as though he were not doing so with the approval of the Hungarian government. In

his report, he evidently attempted to indicate that he had complied with this instruction to the fullest extent possible.

Almost immediately after his arrival he called on Boris Kantorovich, secretary general of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, and also met Semyon Aralov, a member of the Commissariat's collegium and the founder and former head of Soviet military intelligence.¹⁷ Taróczy reports in detail on the exchange concerning Hungarian–Soviet diplomatic relations, frequently citing his Soviet counterparts' remarks almost verbatim. During the conversations, both Kantorovich and Aralov expressed their dissatisfaction with what they saw as Hungary's inconsistent position. Aralov stressed that the world had changed significantly since the Berlin Agreement and Budapest's failure to ratify it: with the exception of the United States, all the major powers had now recognized the Soviet Union, and in consequence, Moscow attached far less importance to Hungarian ratification than it had previously. In addition to Kantorovich and Aralov, Taróczy also consulted the head of department within the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Fyodor Rottstein,¹⁸ who was responsible, as a member of the collective foreign-policy leadership, for press and foreign information. Rottstein spoke about the Soviet Union's current situation, presenting an image of a confident, increasingly prosperous, and successful country with a stable position, increasingly normalized foreign relations, lively foreign trade, and—contrary to rumours circulating in the foreign press—no need of loans.¹⁹ His most important message for Budapest concerned the question of Moscow's possible military intentions. The Soviet Union, he insisted, was not preparing for war; it was primarily concentrating on reconstruction, and thus it was inconceivable that it would embark upon a war within the next five years—even for the purpose of regaining Bessarabia from Romania. At the same time, he stated that if the country were attacked, it would defend itself 'with unprecedented zeal'. Speaking of the Red Army, he emphasized its vital importance, not only militarily, and stressed that its development was proceeding as a key priority. Like Kantorovich and Aralov, Rottstein also claimed that it was no longer the Soviets who needed Hungary, but rather Hungary that was increasingly dependent on Soviet raw materials. His remark about Romania was particularly striking: he described it as 'a thoroughly corrupt, artificially inflated structure' that 'at the soonest opportunity ought to be reduced to within more modest borders.'²⁰ In his view, in this matter the Hungarians would in any case sooner or later recognize the necessity of cooperating with the Soviet Union. He also struck moral and emotional chords when he turned the conversation to the Hungarians of Transylvania, remarking that the Soviet Union regarded them with sympathy, in view of the fact that they were an oppressed people.²¹

The same line was expressed even more bluntly by Moisei Trilisser, head of the Foreign Department of the GPU, with whom Taróczy also held a confidential conversation. The high-ranking official likewise argued that the Bessarabian and Transylvanian questions could be linked, explaining that the Soviets viewed the oppressed population of Transylvania with sympathy. He raised the possibility of immediate cooperation in the field of military intelligence, which, in his view, would be advantageous for both sides and could function even without the establishment of diplomatic relations. Trilisser regarded Hungarian concerns as unfounded: he saw no obstacle either in the Little Entente states or in the ideological differences between the two countries, and dismissed fears of Soviet propaganda as unjustified.²² With regard to the Comintern, he voiced the customary—and rather cynical—Soviet argument that it was an independent organization, with which the Soviet government had nothing whatsoever to do. On Romania, Trilisser spoke even more bluntly than Rottstein: ‘The Romanian nation has not reached such a level of development as to be fit to rule over territories of such magnitude, or to lead nations standing at a higher level of culture than itself.’²³ He further made it clear that cooperation in the fields of military-historical research and the supply of tactical equipment could only be envisaged after diplomatic relations had been formally established.²⁴

The colonel’s meetings described above—with dialogues in part recorded almost verbatim—vividly illustrate the distinctive characteristics of Soviet negotiation and argumentation. The Soviets proved to be firm, even somewhat overbearing interlocutors, and when they deemed it expedient, they not only displayed a measure of cynicism, but also, with no little cunning, very effectively mobilized themes and considerations that were emotionally and morally significant for the other side.

The Soviet Countryside

Following these negotiations, Colonel Taróczy received permission to travel to the Soviet countryside, enabling him and his wife to visit her relatives in Serpukhov, about 100 kilometres from Moscow. This brief visit provided him with an opportunity to gain a taste of Soviet rural life. Once again he found the journey pleasant, thanks to the good-humoured peasants and workers travelling on the train. Arriving in Serpukhov, he describes without sentimentality and in a matter-of-fact tone the straitened circumstances in which the aristocratic cousins of his wife now lived. One had moved back to live with his parents, while another shared a small room with an elderly spinster and supported herself by sewing underwear and work clothes for labourers. The fickleness of fortune is further illustrated by the case of the local cantor, who spoke twelve languages and had until

recently been a lecturer at a theological college, but now depended for his livelihood exclusively on the donations of the faithful. Despite all this, the author does not paint a gloomy picture of the town. He senses that people once again seem hopeful, and in his view with good reason, since many workers are becoming homeowners and food is both cheap and widely available.

With special permission, the couple were also able to travel to the village where his wife was born, Sergievskoye Selo, south of Tula. Here they were confronted with a more dispiriting situation than in Serpukhov. Taróczy's sister-in-law was eking out a miserable existence in the house of the local blacksmith. 'One would not believe how far the cultural level of the people has sunk in the wake of the Revolution and the Civil War. What unbelievable vandalism has swept through here,' the author exclaims indignantly when it emerges that the couple would have to spend the night in the very bed in which the sister's husband had recently lain dying of typhus—and, moreover, that after his death neither the house nor even the bed had been disinfected.²⁵

Yet even here he does not regard the situation as hopeless. He sees the immoral and unscrupulous conduct of the ruling class under the Tsarist regime as responsible for the degraded condition of the people. In his view, the bulk of the rural population has recognized the advantages of the new system; the fields inspire hope, and everyone is confident of a good harvest. In a third of the houses in the village, radio antenna have been installed, which the author again interprets as a sign of development, though he is well aware that they also serve as an effective instrument of 'ideological shaping'. The population is increasing—the peasants are raising many children, and their care of children is attentive and affectionate. The importance of family life, he believes, is increasing. He notes that divorce has become a simple procedure, but with rather idiosyncratic logic claims that this is not a step towards female emancipation, but rather a means of enabling women to devote greater care to ensuring their husbands' happiness. He also takes note of religious sects: one (the 'Pashkovites') is active in the village he visits, and he notes that the Soviet government deliberately enables its spread, since a multitude of sects may weaken the Orthodox Church, which is regarded as reactionary. He also makes another interesting observation regarding religious practices: in Serpukhov, he finds that the so-called 'Living Church' has lost its popularity, whereas in Moscow he had witnessed churches filled to capacity and a palpable religious fervour.

Moscow

Between his two journeys to the countryside, Taróczy had time to look around the Soviet capital. Here he was able to observe the practical consequences of the New Economic Policy (NEP): he encountered an abundance of goods and found both the range of goods in shops and the standard of restaurant hospitality to be good. What the author describes corresponds to historical fact. The 1921 change in economic policy did indeed represent a partial return to capitalist forms of management. As a result, compulsory grain requisitioning was abolished, and though large-scale industry remained in state hands, private enterprise was permitted and private trade was allowed to resume. In 1922, in the interest of financial stabilization, a new, gold-backed, convertible currency—the *chervonets*—was introduced. At the end of 1921, also in the spirit of consolidation following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Cheka was dissolved and reorganized under the name of the State Political Administration (GPU). Of course, this did not signify any substantive change in the organization's functioning; nevertheless, for many it seemed as though order and legal security had at least partially been restored.

Taróczy also went to the cinema and the opera, where he detected no trace of forced Soviet propaganda. In fact, what proved memorable for him at the opera was not the performance itself, but rather a circumstance that made it unmistakably clear that he could not feel safe in the Soviet Union, as he was under constant surveillance. It was hardly coincidental that two high-ranking Soviet military officers took seats next to him in the auditorium, and that after becoming acquainted with one of them the conversation soon turned to military matters. The Soviet commander sought to persuade his Hungarian interlocutor to remain in the country for a few more weeks, so that he might visit a training camp and be introduced to Tukhachevsky, the well-known senior general. Was this a deliberate attempt to entrap him? We do not know. In any case, Taróczy sensed danger and was sufficiently cautious not to accept the invitation. He formulates it diplomatically, yet unmistakably: 'I was fully aware of my situation and of the fact that I was speaking with an unaccountable person.'²⁶

He records the May Day parade, which he was able to observe from the garden of the Kremlin, as a positive experience. He praises 'the magnificent flood of light' and the discipline of the marchers. He notes that the uniforms of the marching soldiers were impeccable, and that their horses likewise made a good impression. Although he had no means of verifying its factual accuracy, he also records a rumour that the prisons were clean and well maintained, in contrast to prison conditions in Tsarist times. Even in this instance, the author expresses no doubts about these rumours.²⁷

Like many other travellers, he also visited the Smolensky Market—a sprawling flea market and popular Moscow attraction. He does not

comment on the wretched circumstances of the former elites of the Tsarist regime, who were compelled to sell the remnants of their former wealth at the market, either draped about their persons or spread out on the ground. A single remark bears witness to a degree of empathy: he declares that he does not wish to buy anything at the market, even though he could acquire very valuable items for pennies, since he does not wish to profit from the misfortune of others. Through Kantorovich's account, Taróczy also gains some insight into the housing shortage in Moscow: the secretary general of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs was himself living with his family in a one-room apartment.

The Image of the Soviet Union Presented by Taróczy

Overall, the author paints a positive picture of the Russians: he finds them not only good-humoured and approachable, but also polite and considerate. He observes that, in contrast to his experiences in Budapest, people on the trams do not jostle or behave roughly. 'This politeness, like some Bolshevik peculiarity, has become second nature to everyone.'²⁸ In Taróczy's account there is no sign of the Soviet (Russian, or indeed 'Asiatic') barbarism—the primitive and coarse behaviour Russians (Soviets) were said to display towards one another—which Hungarian travellers to the Soviet Union between the two world wars, including József Popper, Gyula Illyés and Lajos Nagy, described in their reports.²⁹

It is noteworthy, however, that in the third and fourth situation reports, written in 1927, he formulates his views on the Russian character in a far more nuanced manner, bringing out also its darker and more ruthless side. In keeping with romantic stereotypes, he observes that Russians lack all rationalism and are marked by emotional extremism³⁰—yet he places the emphasis exclusively on a negative reading of this trait. In his view, without an understanding of the intrinsic Russian character, the unprecedented dictatorship introduced by Lenin—Bolshevik despotism—would be incomprehensible. One of the most characteristic features of the Russian mentality, he argues, is cruelty, while despotism is an indispensable component of Russian development. In connection with the party struggle of October 1926, he remarks that in the end 'the most despotic terrorist dictatorship', Leninism, had triumphed.³¹

In connection with the foregoing, Taróczy portrays the Bolshevik Revolution as a turning point which, by virtue of its despotism and hostility to culture, had driven the country back into the Asiatic barbarism from which, after the Tatar domination, it had sought to extricate itself through European reforms. As an illustration of this 'regression', he notes that after the First World War, Russia lost precisely its most culturally developed western territories.³² Of course, Taróczy was not alone in presenting the

Bolshevik Revolution as an Asiatic turn. The aforementioned József Popper—like the writer Sándor Márai, who displayed a passionate interest in Russian culture and Soviet reality—devoted much reflection in his journalistic writings to the nature of Bolshevism, ultimately seeing in it a particular manifestation of the demonic Asiatic forces threatening European civilization.³³

Yet in Taróczy's travel account we find no trace of this interpretation of Bolshevism. When it comes to the Bolshevik system, the author refrains from genuinely negative remarks; he is much more sharply condemnatory of the preceding Tsarist regime. All things considered, he paints an encouraging picture of the Soviet Union, which, in his view, it is increasingly difficult even to regard as a truly socialist country. With reference to the NEP, he reaches the conclusion that 'classical' communism has suffered a definitive defeat and that 'the Russian national turn' is unstoppable. He reiterates this idea a year later, in his second summary assessment, this time comparing the Soviet Union with certain European countries:

'Paradoxical though it may sound, in present-day bourgeois Europe it is precisely the Soviet Union that is the least socialist state. In Britain and Czechoslovakia—in their labour legislation, their financial policy, and the state's influence upon economic life—we find far more traces of state socialism than in Russia, left to itself, reliant upon its shrunken domestic industry, dreaming of "former accumulated capital".'³⁴

He believes that with its conservative turn the Soviet Union has definitively returned to capitalism and set out upon a path of consolidation—a development reflected not only in the abundance of goods, but also in the optimistic expectations of peasants.

The 1925 Summary Assessment

Following his visit, Taróczy not only wrote a summary of his travel experiences, but also, in the same year, and drawing on his fresh impressions, prepared a longer report on conditions in Soviet Russia.³⁵ This is a more conventional, methodical overview, divided into thematic sections which address the character of the Bolshevik system, its developmental tendencies, and its likely future. In essence, he seeks here—in drier form and supported by statistical data—to substantiate the message he had already formulated in his travel account. Here too he adopts a stance that is, if not sympathetic, then at least understanding towards the Bolsheviks. In his discussion of the historical background, he presents Lenin's victory as the logical consequence of the complete degeneration of the Tsarist



The streets of Moscow in the 1920s. Source: Wikimedia Commons

regime; its moral, military, and economic collapse; and the incompetence and indecision of the Provisional Government. This explains why he dwells at length on the corruption and moral irredeemability of the old order.

In his assessment, the Bolsheviks appear as determined leaders who, skilfully exploiting popular sentiment and acting with a clear programme and decisive measures (making peace, pacifying the peasantry, managing anarchy and chaos, etc.), seized power and, by 1921—though they employed the instrument of terror that led to the mass killing of civilians—had taken control of the entire country. In his view, their success was also attributable to the fact that the Whites had cruelly punished the peasants whenever they dispossessed their landlords. With no small degree of partiality, he observes that whereas the Whites routinely requisitioned supplies, the Bolsheviks ‘with iron discipline, threatening even the death penalty, ensured that Red soldiers should take nothing from the peasants’.³⁶ In his discussion of the character of the system—Taróczy uses the term *autocratic*—he relies largely on Bolshevik arguments, according to which the new system was fundamentally democratic: in parallel to the disenfranchisement of the former Tsarist ruling class, 100 million people had been given rights; apart

from those deprived of rights, schools and state positions were opened to all, and even the nationalities question had been settled. As a result of land reform measures, he believes that the peasantry had also been won over, as evidenced by their rallying behind the Red Army. He likewise considers the conclusion of peace with the various nationalities an important factor in the consolidation of Soviet power.

Drawing on statistical data, he reports in detail on the NEP and on various sectors of the Soviet economy (agriculture, forestry, industrial production, the metal industry, the railway network, trade, and so forth), and concludes that after an extraordinary decline during the war, dynamic development had begun again in each of these areas. He offers particular praise for the introduction of the foreign trade monopoly, without which, he argues, the Soviet Union would have become a colony of Europe and would not have been able to strengthen its industry. Thanks in part to its successful currency reforms, the Soviet Union had also regained financial stability, and in Taróczy's view all the conditions were therefore in place for it to become 'the richest and most powerful colossus of the continent'.³⁷ He emphasizes that the Soviet Union had consolidated, enjoyed a certain degree of support from every social stratum, and thus showed absolutely no signs of imminent collapse.

He commends various educational and cultural measures, giving particular emphasis to the campaign against illiteracy, which won the admiration of many contemporary observers. He regards Soviet propaganda as extraordinarily effective, manifesting itself, among other things, in the targeted briefing of foreign scholars and journalists, the provision of Soviet-friendly material to the foreign press, and the careful guidance of foreign visitors. He also notes the dynamic development of the press, and considers the network of worker and peasant correspondents an astute initiative not only designed to demonstrate that the Red press is the voice of the people, but also well suited for keeping the population under observation, thereby rendering valuable service to the political police, i.e. the GPU. He considers public order and discipline excellent, both in government offices and in transport. As in his travel account, he highlights the punctuality of the trains, the cleanness of the carriages and stations, and the absence of prostitution. In this report too he records what he heard from the Bolsheviks—namely, that the prisons were characterized by humane treatment, order, and good hygiene. He considers exaggerated the foreign rumour that the Soviet Union had become 'Judaized'. To his knowledge, for example, there were scarcely any Jews among the provincial authorities or civil servants; moreover, he found that those Jews he did meet were entirely Russian in sentiment.³⁸ As regards the Red Army, he emphasizes first the relationship of trust between the military and the

civilian population, and also the fact that former Tsarist officers who had remained in the Soviet Union had entered the service of the Red Army. Like other contemporary travellers, he praises the civilizing, cultural, and educational activities taking place within the Army.

He speaks in explicitly laudatory terms of GPU officers, observing that they are selected from among men of excellent physical qualities, are determined and courageous, and their uniforms, moreover, are 'extremely smart'.³⁹ What is more surprising is that—characteristically—he makes no mention here either of the cruelties of the GPU or of the lack of freedom. As in his travel account, he also commends the state's family-friendly policies, the cult of the child, the affection and tenderness shown towards the young, and the strengthening of 'pure popular morals'. In Taróczy's interpretation, the Tsarist regime—which aped the West and was characterized, among other things, by prostitution, the neglect of the family, the pursuit of money and pleasure, and spiritual emptiness and selfishness, functioning, in short, as a veritable moral contagion—had been replaced in the Soviet Union by a far healthier, more beneficial system. This, he suggests, is illustrated by measures such as the banning of prostitution, the strict punishment of abortion, and the abolition of orphanages. He argues that the great powers of the West are grappling with numerous problems (colonies, national conflicts, and so forth), and therefore it is essential to pay close attention to what is happening in the USSR. 'The Bolsheviks proclaim themselves the pioneers of a better, more beautiful future. We cannot deny them the role of a critical opposition. In striving towards their distant goals, they urge the world towards solutions and, in hastening them, they in fact fulfil a mission', writes Taróczy, in a tone that at times almost echoes Bolshevik propaganda itself.⁴⁰ He concludes by predicting that a great ideological clash will eventually take place between the Western world and the Bolshevik state.

He analyses the Soviet Union's foreign relations in detail, examining—by individual countries and groups of countries—the interests and considerations that shaped and influenced, for example, Soviet–German, Soviet–French, and Soviet–Polish relations, and the Soviet Union's dealings with the states of the Little Entente. Finally, he devotes a separate chapter to the Soviet–Hungarian relationship. Taking an interesting line of argument, he explains why it would be more advantageous for Hungary to cooperate with a Soviet Russia than with a Russian state of a different ideological persuasion—such as one resembling the old regime. He points to their shared goal of revising the Versailles peace settlement, and their hostile stance towards the Little Entente states, creating a close community of interests between the two countries which could in turn facilitate diplomatic rapprochement. He also argues that the possibilities



The Kremlin and churches of Moscow in the early 1920s. Source: Wikimedia Commons

for economic cooperation were far greater with a Bolshevik state. The trade monopoly and the introduction of concessions, he suggests, provided smaller countries with greater room for manoeuvre, since within such a framework they would stand a much better chance of holding their own in competition with the great powers. In light of all this, Taróczy considered it vital to establish diplomatic relations as soon as possible, and—as a second step—to develop and expand trade cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Taken as a whole, Colonel Taróczy's travel account and his 1925 situation report painted a positive picture of the Soviet Union—not only in contrast to the experiences of the aforementioned József Popper, who set out in 1924, and other contemporary observers, but also when compared with certain assessments found in Taróczy's later reports. This is all the more surprising when we consider that he was otherwise a sharp-eyed observer, and neither his wife's aristocratic background nor the fate of her family would seem to have justified such partiality. It is striking how few critical or condemnatory remarks about the Bolshevik state appear in the first two reports, while expressions of understanding and even praise abound. At

times one has the impression of reading an intelligence officer's report that borders on the tone of a 'fellow-traveller'—as though he were engaged in a kind of performance. These two texts do not emphasize the suffering of the people, nor the violence, cruelty, lack of freedom, or disenfranchisement, but rather normalization—economically in comparison with the war years, and above all morally in comparison with the Tsarist regime. Whereas in the author's interpretation the Tsarist system had degraded the country, the Bolsheviks had in every respect set it on a path of growth and renewal. With regard to families, children, and even the peasantry, he reports conditions that appear almost idyllic. A telling example: while Popper—by no means uniquely among visitors to the country—was accosted at every turn by prostitutes in the streets of Moscow (not to mention the brothels he visited), Taróczy concludes that prostitution had ceased to exist in the Soviet Union. Observers who sought objectivity not merely in words almost invariably complained of disorder, immense filth, chaos, delayed trains, harshness in people's dealings with one another, and the appalling plight of the peasantry. In Taróczy's two writings we find no such complaints—indeed, quite the contrary, his accounts describe orderliness and cleanliness.

The author's partiality can be explained by the fact that his 1925 reports had a clear objective: namely to convince his superiors of the necessity for Hungary to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union as soon as possible. Presumably for this reason he sought to present an image of the USSR that would not alarm Hungarian decision-makers, who were otherwise predisposed to hostility towards the Soviet Union and stood in stark ideological opposition to it. He was attempting to reassure them that they were dealing with a consolidated country striving for peace, politically conservative in orientation, and moving towards a capitalist system—a state with which it was both possible and beneficial to cooperate in a rational manner. Indeed, he presents this not merely as an opportunity, but as a necessity: the Soviet state was visibly becoming an increasingly powerful and influential empire, and Hungary could scarcely afford not to attempt to cultivate good relations with it. In his view, the Soviet Union—growing ever less socialist—could become a predictable and useful partner. Normalized diplomatic relations could offer not only a large trading partner and market for Hungarian exports, but also, given their converging foreign-policy interests, might also assist diplomatically isolated Hungary in pursuing its revisionist aims. With his travel account and his 1925 situation report, he effectively reinforced the line of argument advanced by his Soviet negotiating partners.

Taróczy's proposals did not meet with approval. One reason for this undoubtedly lay in the fact that he advanced his recommendation to establish diplomatic relations at a moment when—following the failure

of the Hungarian Parliament to ratify the Berlin Treaty—the issue had for the time being been removed from the Hungarian political agenda. And, quite apart from his specific conclusions, it can hardly have inspired enthusiasm that he appeared, all things considered, to cast developments in the Bolshevik state in an excessively favourable light.

Translated by Thomas Sneddon

¹ Taróczy was born in Debrecen in 1874 as Ferdinánd Ernő Szmazsenka. In 1924, he Magyarized his Slovak-sounding surname to Nándor Taróczy. Having graduated from the Imperial and Royal Cadet School and the War Academy, he embarked upon a military career, serving as a first lieutenant. During the First World War he fought on the Eastern Front as a company commander and was decorated several times for bravery. From 1919, he worked at the Military Archives in Vienna. In April 1923, he was entrusted with the duties of military specialist officer at the Royal Hungarian Legation in Estonia. In the course of his work, he acquired an excellent command of the Estonian language. His responsibilities included monitoring the Soviet economy and Soviet–Baltic as well as Soviet–German military and political relations, drafting reports, following the press, and dealing with cultural matters. On 1 May 1929, he retired but the tranquillity of his later years was brought to an end by the Second World War. Although he joined the Communist Party in 1950 (at the age of 77) he was evicted from his villa on Szarvas Gábor Street in Budapest's 12th district, and his pension was withdrawn, forcing him to take work as a night watchman. After prolonged correspondence and petitions, he succeeded in regaining part of his pension. This, together with an Austrian inheritance from his mother, enabled him to purchase a house for himself and his family. He died in Budapest in 1973 at the age of 99. For a more detailed account of his life, see: E. László Varga, 'Őfelsége katonája, Kádár alattvalója. Taróczy Nándor magyar királyi altábornagy életútja' (His Majesty's Soldier, Kádár's Subject. The Life of Nándor Taróczy, Royal Hungarian Lieutenant General), *Aetas*, 4 (2011), 61–81; Nándor Taróczy and E. László Varga, 'Taróczy Nándor magyar királyi altábornagy visszaemlékezése' (The Memoirs of Nándor Taróczy, Royal Hungarian Lieutenant General), *Aetas*, 3 (2012), 96–113; Miklós Kun, 'Hogyan került egy magyar katonai hírszerző 1925-ben a Szovjetunióba?' (How Did a Hungarian Military Intelligence Officer End up in the Soviet Union in 1925?), *Polgári Szemle*, 3–6 (2014), 291–301; Sándor Szakály, *A 2. vkf. osztály. Tanulmányok a magyar katonai hírszerzés és kémelhárítás történetéből 1918–1945* (The Second Section of the General Staff: Studies on the History of Hungarian Military Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence, 1918–1945) (Magyar Napló Kiadó Kft.–Veritas Történetkutató Intézet, 2015), 232–233.

² The diplomat Mihály Jungerth-Arnóthy played a distinguished role after the First World War in the repatriation of Hungarian prisoners of war who had fallen into Russian captivity. Drawing on the experience he gained at that time, he soon became an expert on Soviet affairs. Between 1923 and 1933 he headed Hungarian diplomatic missions in the Baltic states and in Finland. In 1924, he led the Hungarian delegation that conducted negotiations in Berlin on the establishment of Soviet–Hungarian diplomatic relations. After a posting in Ankara, he served as Hungarian minister in

Moscow between 1935 and 1939, and later in Sofia. From 6 April to 15 October 1944, he acted as the permanent deputy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

³ Varga gives a detailed account of the dispute between Taróczy and his superiors, as well as of its consequences. The relationship between Jungerth-Arnóthy and his subordinate was not free from professional rivalry; the military attaché's linguistic skills and his excellent network of Soviet contacts may well have aroused the minister's jealousy. This, too, may have played a role in Taróczy's eventual recall. To illustrate the conflict that developed with General Jenő Ruszkay, then head of Department VI-2 of the Ministry of Defence, Varga quotes from a private letter addressed by the department head to Taróczy in 1928, in which the author of the letter gives voice to his profound dissatisfaction with Taróczy's activities. See Varga, 'Őfelsége katonája, Kádár alattvalója', 75–76.

⁴ Nándor Taróczy, 'Harmadik összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról' (Third Summary Assessment of Soviet Russia), October 1926, File no. 110/71. k.sz. 1926/2. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Miklós Kun for his generous gesture in making the Taróczy reports available to me from his private archive.

⁵ Nándor Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom. 1925 április–május' (My Journey in the Soviet Union: April–May 1925), Hungarian Legation in Tallinn (Reval), Manuscript, Reference no. 135/98, (1925), 34–35.

⁶ Nándor Taróczy, 'Negyedik összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról' (Fourth Summary Assessment of Soviet Russia), August 1927. Part I, p. 15.

⁷ Kun, 'Hogyan került egy magyar katonai hírszerző 1925-ben a Szovjetunióba?', 300.

⁸ Mikhail Abramovich Trilisser (born Meier Abramovich Trilisser, 1883–1940), also known under the pseudonym Moszkin, served in the 1920s as head of the foreign department of the Cheka and later of the OGPU—that is, of Soviet 'civilian' foreign intelligence.

⁹ Varga, 'Őfelsége katonája, Kádár alattvalója', 75.

¹⁰ Nándor Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról' (My Journey in the Soviet Union—Summary Assessment of Soviet Russia), Royal Hungarian Legation, Tallinn/Reval, Reference no. 137/100, September 1925; Nándor Taróczy, 'Második összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról' (Second Summary Assessment of Russia) (April 1926), Manuscript, Reference no. 9/9; Taróczy, 'Harmadik összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról'; Taróczy, 'Negyedik összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról'; Nándor Taróczy, 'Ötödik összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról' (Fifth Summary Assessment of Russia), Manuscript, January 1928; Nándor Taróczy, 'A Kelet emancipációja Európa gyámsága alól, különös tekintettel Moszkva szerepére. I. rész: A kínai bonyodalmak a Csendes-óceán hegemoniájáért való harc, 1927. január; II. rész: A közép-ázsiai és a közel-keleti népek szabadságmozgalma', 1927. május, Manuscript ('The Emancipation of the East from Europe's Tutelage, with Particular Regard to Moscow's Role. Part I: The Chinese Complications in the Struggle for Hegemony in the Pacific, January 1927; Part II: The Freedom Movements of the Peoples of Central Asia and the Near East, May 1927).

¹¹ Taróczy, 'Második összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról', 48.

¹² Official relations were established only much later, in 1934.

¹³ Kun, 'Hogyan került egy magyar katonai hírszerző 1925-ben a Szovjetunióba?', 295.

¹⁴ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 2–3.

¹⁵ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 2.

¹⁶ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 4.

- ¹⁷ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 5.
- ¹⁸ Fyodor Aronovich Rothstein (Rottstein) (1871–1953), diplomat and member of the Collegium of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Between 1920 and 1923, he served in Iran in the Soviet Foreign Service. From 1923 to 1930, he was editor-in-chief of the journal *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'* (International Life) and a member of the Collegium of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Between 1927 and 1945, he was one of the editors of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, and from 1939 he was a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.
- ¹⁹ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 12.
- ²⁰ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 14.
- ²¹ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 14.
- ²² Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 21–22.
- ²³ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 22.
- ²⁴ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 23.
- ²⁵ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 25.
- ²⁶ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 19.
- ²⁷ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 29–30.
- ²⁸ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 32.
- ²⁹ This is a reference to the following travel narratives: József Popper, *A mai Szovjetország. Egy tanulmányút élményei* (Contemporary Soviet Russia: The Experiences of a Study Tour) (Világirodalom Kiadás, 1926) (Popper travelled to the Soviet Union in 1924, one year before Taróczy); Gyula Illyés, *Oroszország 1934* (Russia 1934), in *Szíves Kalauz* (A Willing Guide) (Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1974); Lajos Nagy, *Tíz ezer kilométer Szovjetország földjén* (Ten Thousand Kilometres Across Soviet Russia) (Interart, 1989).
- ³⁰ Taróczy, 'Negyedik összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról', 88–89.
- ³¹ Taróczy, 'Harmadik összefoglaló helyzetkép Oroszágról', 72.
- ³² Taróczy, 'A Kelet emancipációja Európa gyámsága alól, különös tekintettel Moszkva szerepére', Part I, 5.
- ³³ Sándor Márai, 'Ázsia és Európa' (Asia and Europe), *Pesti Hírlap* (6 November 1941), 5.
- ³⁴ Taróczy, 'Második összefoglaló helyzetkép', 49. Popper, however, saw matters differently: he characterised the Soviet economic system as state communism and considered any meaningful turn towards capitalism to be inconceivable. Popper, *A mai Szovjetország*, 115–116.
- ³⁵ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról'.
- ³⁶ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 9.
- ³⁷ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 55.
- ³⁸ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 61.
- ³⁹ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 106.
- ⁴⁰ Taróczy, 'Szovjetuniói utazásom – Összefoglaló helyzetkép Szovjetországról', 116.

OUR AUTHORS

TIMOTHY W. BURNS is a professor of political science at Baylor University, a senior fellow of the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization, a member of the Editorial Board of *The European Journal of Political Philosophy* (Budapest) and of the Editorial Advisory Board of *Research in Classics* (Beijing). His most recent book is *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. He is also the author of *Shakespeare's Political Wisdom*, co-author (with Thomas L. Pangle) of *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, and editor or co-editor of five volumes of essays. He also co-edits Palgrave MacMillan's Recovering Political Philosophy series and is editor-in-chief of *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*.

GERGELY EGEDY is a historian, political scientist, and professor emeritus at Ludovika University of Public Service in Budapest. He specializes in the history of political thought and of the modern English-speaking world. His major works include *Nagy-Britannia története* (The History of Great Britain, 1998, 2011); *Konzervativizmus az ezredfordulón* (Conservatism at the Turn of the Millennium, 2001); *Brit konzervatív gondolkodás és politika* (British Conservative Thought and Politics, 2005); *Konzervatív gondolkodás és politika az Egyesült Államokban* (Conservative Thought and Politics in the United

States, 2014); *Bevezetés a nemzetközi kapcsolatok elméletébe* (Introduction to the Theory of International Relations, 2007, 2nd. ed. 2011, 3rd. ed. 2017); and *Nagy-Britannia és az európai integráció* (The UK and European Integration, 2017) co-authored with Zoltán Gálik.

ZOLTÁN FRENYÓ is a Hungarian Catholic philosopher. He studied philosophy and history at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (1975–1980). He was research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1980–2020), as well as a professor at Pázmány Péter Catholic University (1995–2005), Tomori Pál College, Budapest (2008–2024), and several other higher-education institutions. He has published 30 volumes on different disciplines of philosophy.

JUDIT HAMMERSTEIN is a historian and cultural manager. She graduated from the University of Pécs with a degree in History and French Language and Literature. She also studied at the University of Amsterdam, the University of Poitiers in France, Paris X Nanterre University, and the German-language Andrassy University Budapest. She received her PhD in History from Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. She has worked in many areas of cultural administration and diplomacy, including four years

as director of the Balassi Institute, the former central organization for Hungarian cultural diplomacy. She is currently a senior research fellow at the VERITAS Research Institute for History and Archives and a lecturer at the Department of International Relations at Károli Gáspár University. Her research focuses on the history of Russian–Hungarian relations between the two world wars, World War I Siberian captivity and memoir literature, and a range of issues in Hungarian intellectual history during the inter-war period.

BORIS KÁLNOKY grew up in Germany, the United States, the Netherlands, and France. His family left Hungary in 1947. He studied politics and history in Hamburg, and went on to work at the German daily *Die Welt* from 1987. In 1995, he became Balkans correspondent for *Die Welt*, based in Budapest, and moved on in 2004 to become Middle East correspondent, based in Istanbul. He returned to Budapest as South East Europe correspondent in 2013. In 2020, he accepted a call from Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) in Budapest to become the head of the Media School there. His book *Ahnenland* was published first in Germany (Droemer Verlag, 2011), then in Hungary (Őseim földje, MCC Press, 2023) and again in German (Schiller Verlag, 2024).

MÁRIA KONDOR-SZILÁGYI is an art historian, and has been a staff member at Műcsarnok Kunsthalle

Budapest from 2013. Since 2019 she has been the chief curator of the institution. She has directed and organized many international and Hungarian exhibitions, and she is the author and editor of various catalogues. She was also the curator of the Hungarian Pavilion in 2023, at the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture, with the project 'Reziduum. The Frequency of Architecture'. She regularly publishes and appears at conferences. Her area of research and interest focuses on the possibility of examining transitions between different art forms and genres.

ZSOLT NÉMETH is a founding member of Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Party) and has been a member of Parliament since 1990. He studied political science at St Anthony's College, Oxford University, as a visiting student in 1988 and 1989. He holds an MA in Economics and Sociology from Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences in Budapest (today Corvinus University of Budapest). Since 2014, he has been chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee and head of the Hungarian Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly to the Council of Europe. He was chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee between 2002 and 2010, and parliamentary state secretary in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs from 1998 to 2002, and again between 2010 and 2014. In 2004, he was a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament for a year. He

was one of the main sponsors of the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities (1993), which granted individual and collective rights and the right to self-government to ethnic and national minorities living in Hungary, as well as of the act allowing non-resident Hungarians to apply for Hungarian citizenship if they are of Hungarian origin and speak the language (2010). He is also a founder of the Pro Minoritate Foundation, an honorary chief superintendent of the Calvinist Congregation of Transylvania, and a member of the Knight's Order of the Johannites.

ANTHONY O'HEAR is professor of philosophy at the University of Buckingham. From 1994–2019 he was director of the Royal Institute of Philosophy in London, and editor of the journal *Philosophy*. He has advised several British governments on education, and has written many books and articles on philosophy. These include *Beyond Evolution* (Clarendon Press, 1997), *Philosophy in the New Century* (Continuum, 2001), *Transcendence, Creation and Incarnation* (Routledge, 2020), *The Prism of Truth: Reflections on Myth* (Wipf and Stock, 2024), and *Popper, Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge Element, Cambridge University Press, 2025). He was appointed OBE for services to education in 2018.

JOHN O'SULLIVAN is editor-at-large of the *National Review* in New York, where he served as editor-in-chief for ten years. He was a special adviser to

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Downing Street, and later assisted her in the writing of her two volumes of memoirs. He has held a wide variety of senior editorial positions in the media on both sides of the Atlantic. He is the founder and co-chairman of the Atlantic Initiative, an international bipartisan organization dedicated to reinvigorating and expanding the Atlantic community of democracies, launched at the Congress of Prague in May 1996 by President Václav Havel and Margaret Thatcher. Until 2011, he was the executive editor of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in Prague. Currently he is the president of the Danube Institute, Budapest, and an editor-at-large of *Hungarian Review* and *Hungarian Conservative*. His latest collections of essays are *The Woke versus the West: Awkward Questions for a Progressive Age* (2020) and *Sleepwalking Into Wokeness: How We Got Here* (2023).

JAMES BLAKE WIENER is a world historian, researcher, and writer who specializes in comparative history with a focus on Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. He earned his BA in History and his MA in World History from New York University. He is a co-founder and the former communications director of *World History Encyclopedia*. He was also professor at State College of Florida and Pepperdine University, where he taught European and American history. He resides in Zurich, Switzerland, where he is a consultant to educational and cultural institutions.