Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

Like Dickens’ novel of the French Revolution, this book is a tale of two revolutionary cities – Munich and Budapest – at a time of great uncertainty and upheaval. In the wake of World War I and the Russian revolutions, Central Europeans in 1919 faced a world of possibilities, threats, and extreme contrasts. The war and revolutions had caused the deaths of millions of people worldwide and the injury and displacement of millions more, and seen the overthrow of centuries-old ruling dynasties and the birth of brand new states defined by the ideas of nationalism and socialism. The world-historical transformations affected the lives of Central Europeans on every level, interlocking individual experiences and observations with the grand narratives of history. Most Central Europeans were acutely aware of how their lives had been elevated or hijacked into a world-historical struggle or moment of change. As they struggled in difficult circumstances with the daily business of their lives, they were pulled voluntarily and involuntarily into the politics and violence of their postwar societies. Political leaders made proclamations in their names and shouted slogans at demonstrations and on posters; city streets became the sites of shooting and lynchings. Their wallets filled with successive, competing, and often worthless currencies as they tried to provision their families. They found their public and private identities as teachers, students, workers, mothers, writers, Jews, Christians, women, and soldiers politicized by the ideological narratives of the time. Lives disrupted by the war were set even further adrift as it became clear that there was no way back to the familiar prewar world. As much as that world had been stifling or difficult, the world of 1919 was, like
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Dickens’ evocation of the French Revolution, one which could be seen as many things, but always “in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

Dickens’ novel famously begins with the paradox, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”; the 1919 revolutions in Central Europe evoked similarly dichotomous interpretations. Dramatic events since the end of the world war seemed poised to transform the world, but the form of that transformation was unclear and violently contested. The political perceptions of contemporaries, framed by gender stereotypes and antisemitism, reveal the sense of living history, of “fighting the world revolution,” that was shared by residents of the two cities. By examining how contemporaries experienced the contradictory “best of times” and “worst of times,” we uncover important information about the worldview and intellectual milieu that came to predominate in both interwar Germany and Hungary, playing an important role in their later national histories of antisemitism and fascism.

In 1919, it seemed to many observers not only that the “old world” could be remade, reimagined, and reformed, but also that it must be. Both revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries were focused on shaping this emerging new order according to their own worldview. All of the political conflicts of nineteenth-century Central Europe, the struggles over suffrage, nationalism, and socialism, which had mostly remained in the realm of politics and ideas, suddenly seemed to burst into violent physical reality in the streets and societies of Munich and Budapest in 1919. The possibilities of 1919 were liberating and terrifying at once—ordinary people as well as elites found themselves empowered by the atmosphere of uncertainty and hope. By examining the narratives of these Central European revolutions, this book helps answer the question of why so many Hungarians and Germans chose to employ their new political power for violence and repression.

The idea of world revolution profoundly shaped events in Central Europe in 1919. Revolution is naturally a liminal moment—the old order has been torn down, is in ruins (or so it seems), and the new is still uncertain. In such moments, images of a “topsy-turvy” world fly to the forefront, and it is not primarily the topics of economic or political transformation that serve as fodder for the imagination but rather the breaking of taboos—gender hierarchies overturned, ritual sacrifices, iconoclasm. In these liminal moments, the language of race and gender was tremendously important for symbolizing the breakdown of “normality.” Revolutionary archetypes of a world overturned helped to determine the behavior of participants and the perceptions of observers on both sides of the revolutionary divide. Revolutionary leaders telegraphed to Moscow about their victories and legislated for a new world order. At the same time, conservatives saw even the proclamation of democratic republican governments at the end of the war in autumn 1918 as “the deluge.” Their memoirs and letters bemoan a total social and moral breakdown.
and describe the “filthy” and “dangerous” reality that they observed on the streets around them. Even the German author Thomas Mann – a moderate bourgeois observer, caught in the middle of the Munich revolution in March 1919 – described how “news from the world has really shaken me,” after reading of the revolution in Budapest and communist demonstrations in Vienna and Italy. 1 Angry at the Entente and the terms of the Paris peace treaties, Mann found the news of world revolution and the revolt against the Paris Peace Conference exhilarating, “even if in the form of communism.” He felt “ready to take to the streets and shout ‘Down with the western liar-democracies! Long live Germany and Russia! Long live communism!’” 2 During the 1919 revolutions in Munich and Budapest, many people experienced the desire to demonstrate, revolt, and shock, and what they observed around them was shocking.

In 1919 Central Europe came close to hosting the world revolution hoped for and predicted by Vladimir Lenin and Lev Trotsky, yet the revolutions in Budapest and Munich were historical ephemera. Following the defeat of the Habsburg Monarchy and its German imperial ally at the end of World War I, the cities of Budapest and Munich underwent the only successful – if only temporarily – soviet revolutions outside of Russia. Both revolutionary governments fell quickly in the face of armed counterrevolution in the spring and summer of 1919. Nonetheless, these brief revolutions had lasting effects on the politics and culture of postwar society. This book examines the Central European revolutionary moment in 1919 that followed World War I, placing local events in Munich and Budapest into a larger, transnational, European revolutionary tradition. This is a “tale of two cities,” so to speak, and, like Dickens’ novel, we are concerned with the histories of two cities during a time of revolutionary upheaval and violence. Through this transnational comparison we see the power of preexisting motifs of revolution, race, and gender in shaping both the actions of revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries and the narratives that explain them.

The Revolutionary Idea

Even before the French Revolution, Europeans had begun to think of society as an object to be shaped and created through human thought and action rather than passively received or experienced. Revolution was the act of radically transforming the given social order, and the French revolutionaries had shown that this was possible. This initial assumption of revolutionary possibility shaped all modern European politics after 1789. Along with the inspiration or

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1 Diary entry for Monday, March 24, 1919. Thomas Mann, Tagebücher 1918–1921, edited by Peter de Mendelssohn (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1979), 177–8. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German and Hungarian are my own.
2 Ibid.
temptation of revolution came its twin or mirror, fear and the desire to prevent revolution, to protect the social order from radical transformation.

Between the French Revolution and World War I there were many European revolutions, and most of them failed. These were stagings of the revolutionary idea, even farces, according to Karl Marx. The Paris Commune, 1848, 1830 – in all of these cases, 1789 was both evoked and condemned – the story of the French Revolution provided the narrative frame for observers and participants in later events. With each staging, the revolutionary narrative and drama was honed by participants and opponents, adding new dramatic elements and vocabulary. These reoccurring upheavals, however infrequent and localized they seem with hindsight, kept the question of revolution at the center of political discourse all over Europe in the nineteenth century, both for those who hoped for and those who feared the next uprising.

Parallel to this chronology of acute political uprisings, nineteenth-century politicians developed a ritualized language of revolution. In particular, the new and growing working-class political parties adopted platforms calling for revolutionary change, mostly along Marxist lines. The language of revolution, tied to the possibility of remaking the social order, played a central role in the education and recruitment of working-class supporters and in creating a positive identification of their economic interests with the political platform of socialist parties. The radical language of most of these parties was usually far more revolutionary than the actual political program the parties pursued in parliamentary politics.

The radical language that drew workers to the parties raised their expectation of revolution and a radical transformation of society in their favor. It also had a mirror effect in the increasingly hyperbolic fear of revolution and the working class among the middle and upper classes and their refusal in many cases to accept even moderate demands made by representatives of the workers. The experience of the German Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), Europe’s largest working-class party by far, provides an excellent example of this. Solidly reformist and committed to change from within the parliamentary system, the party retained radical revolutionary rhetoric in its platform. Despite its reformist actions and its mass membership, the party was outlawed for over a decade (1878–90) in the German Empire under the conservative Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Owing to universal manhood suffrage in the German Empire, the SPD maintained its influence despite the ban. Although the party was illegal, SPD politicians continued to be voted into the German Reichstag.

Some recent works have used a similar perspective on the power of revolutionary events to create violent counterrevolutionary terror, see Adam Zamoyski, Phantom Terror: Political Paranoia and the Creation of the Modern State, 1789–1848 (New York: Basic Books, 2014); and on the Paris Commune, John Merriman, Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune (New York: Basic Books, 2014).
Once it became legal again after 1890, the SPD became the largest party in the Reichstag by the outbreak of World War I. Its revolutionary rhetoric, however, prevented the bourgeois parties from joining it in a governing coalition. Thus, even the European socialist party with the greatest parliamentary representation remained outside of parliamentary governance in Imperial Germany.

Other Central European socialist parties found themselves even more politically isolated, with no incentive to moderate their revolutionary platforms. In the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungarian conservatives desperately fought any attempt to widen suffrage through the end of World War I. Lack of suffrage reform meant that the Hungarian socialists had no chance of winning elections and having representation in parliament. With its main membership outside the electorate and no likelihood of suffrage reform, the Hungarian socialists hewed to their calls for political revolution, enhancing conservative fears. This cycle of exclusion and radicalization marked the prewar history of socialist politics in Hungary.

Along with failed revolutions and radical rhetoric, the decades before World War I saw concrete changes in Europe. The nineteenth century was a time of radical transformation of society, though almost none of it was brought about by political revolution. The transformation of economy, society, and politics that is lumped by historians, not inappropriately, under the umbrella of industrial revolution was at least as radical as the changes desired or feared in the failed political revolutions of the century. Some of the conflicts seen in Central Europe in 1919 had to do with transformations that had already occurred and that were merely sanctioned after the fact by the revolutionaries. The widening of suffrage, the emancipation of women, workers, and Jews, the central role of urban populations in national politics, and the expansion of industrial production were all supported by laws and actions of the revolutionary governments in 1918 and 1919, but they were hardly brought about by the declaration of a republic or a soviet republic. These were the products of long-term developments in Central Europe, developments that conservatives and imperial governments sought to ignore or cover over in the decades before World War I. But the suffering of the long war brought the deep crises of society to the surface, forcing them onto the political agenda.

The outbreak of World War I seemed to change everything for Central Europeans. In the first flush of patriotism, governments and their opponents offered messianic visions of national (and nationalist) unity and ideas about the redemptive power of violence and sacrifice. Many observers noted how hatred of foreign foes suddenly trumped hatred of enemies at home. Over the course of the war, mass conscription, rationing, and war provisioning integrated the masses into the state bureaucracy to an unprecedented degree. This integration and sacrifice on behalf of the state during the war led to an emotional identification with the state and nation and to demands for compensation and
representation on a political level. In the midst of this situation, the Russian revolutions of February and October 1917 relocated “revolution” back into the realm of active rather than merely rhetorical politics. In the midst of the violence of the world war and waves of mass strikes across Europe, Lenin and the leaders of the Bolshevik Party proclaimed that the October Revolution would be the herald of the world revolution.

Historians have often described Europe in 1917 using explosive metaphors of tinderbox or powder keg, a situation ready for ignition by the acts and words of revolutionaries. That ignition famously happened in Russia, where, in early March, protests on the socialist International Women’s Day in the capital, St. Petersburg, eventually resulted in the abdication of the tsar and the end of the Romanov monarchy. Parliamentary leaders established a provisional government and, at the same time, across the country workers, soldiers, students, peasants, and others formed councils or soviets. The provisional government and the councils struggled for power and for control of the country. Yet, in truth, by the summer of 1917, neither the councils nor the provisional government was in control of the country. Russia seemed to be falling into chaos when, on November 7, Lenin and his Bolshevik Party overthrew the provisional government, employing the popular slogan of “all power to the soviets!” This revolutionary seizure of power sent shock waves into a war-weary Europe that was still reeling from the news of the first Russian Revolution. The new Soviet leadership believed that its only chance of survival was in the further spread of revolution. A Soviet-led backward and agrarian Russia could not endure with hostile neighbors and the strike waves in 1918 in Central Europe and the mutinies of troops on various fronts seemed to suggest that the revolution might spread. What was hoped for in Moscow and St. Petersburg was desperately feared in the other European capitals. Therefore, when revolution broke out in Central Europe at the end of the war, the region sat at the nexus of all these forces. Was this another performance of the well-worn tragicomic drama as in 1830 or 1871, or was this the real thing? The revolution that had been awaited and dreaded since at least 1789 could have been happening. Would the crises of the nineteenth century finally be resolved through political transformation and violence?

The threat of world revolution was a dominant concern of the ministers and governmental representatives who gathered in Paris in January 1919 to

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4 The revolutions actually occurred in March and November by the European calendar but are usually referred to by February and October, the months of the Russian Orthodox calendar then in use in the Russian Empire (in 1917 the two calendars were about two weeks different).
5 My favorite metaphor of the revolutions has always been Eric Hobsbawm’s “like mushrooms after the rains” for the spontaneous creation of soviets all over the Russian Empire. Eric Hobsbawm, Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991 (New York: Penguin, 1994), 61.
conclude the peace treaties. The work of the thousands of experts and delegates of the Entente powers at the Paris Peace Conference took not just months but years and was not complete until the final treaty with Turkey was signed in 1923. The conference addressed not only contentious questions of reparations and territorial adjustments but also establishing a new international order in the wake of the dissolution of the German, Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires. The example of Russia, where the fall of empire had led to communist rule loomed especially large in their considerations.

The revolutions in Munich and Budapest occurred in the spring of 1919, following the armistice that officially ended World War I.\(^6\) Their location, Central Europe, situated them both geographically and ideologically between Paris and Moscow. The Soviets and the Entente, these contending constituencies, served as audience, suitors, enemies, and historical models. The French Revolution and the Paris Commune as well as the 1905 and ongoing revolutions in Russia offered positive and negative examples for understanding the whirl of events. Revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries in Munich and Budapest understood that events in their cities were part of a larger political drama unfolding across Europe and the world. The Russian Revolution and the Paris Peace Conference were the international contexts in which the Bavarian and Hungarian revolutions first succeeded and then failed, and in which events were remembered and compared.

**A World Revolution in Central Europe?**

May Day 1919 was an auspicious occasion. It was the first time Europeans were able to celebrate the workers’ holiday since the end of the terrible “Great War” in which millions had lost their lives and millions more had been maimed or displaced. It was also only the second May Day celebrated since the October Revolution of 1917 had brought the Bolshevik Party to power in Russia and proclaimed the world’s first workers’ state. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin greeted the cheering crowds assembled on Red Square for the May Day demonstrations. According to the official report in the party paper *Izvestia*, “After greeting the Moscow and world proletariat, Lenin compared the May Day celebrations of the previous year with the present celebrations.”\(^7\) His comparison with 1918 reflected positive changes in both the security of communist power in Russia and the progress of the world revolution.

Lenin’s speech used the narrative of the Central European revolutions to tell a powerfully optimistic tale of world revolution. Though small and embattled,\(^6\) Of course, despite the ongoing Peace Conference, the fighting was not over everywhere, especially not in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Russian Empire.\(^7\) *Izvestia* 93, May 3, 1919, in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 29, 4th edition (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 328–31 (accessed via marxists.org).
the allied revolutions in Bavaria and Hungary offered proof that the Bolsheviks in Russia were not isolated radicals but rather the vanguard of a wave of successful European revolutions. This narrative could reassure his embattled supporters in Russia as they faced the ongoing civil war. It could also inspire communist revolutionaries both in the former Russian Empire and further afield that their cause was not only just but ascendant. Along these lines, Lenin assured his listeners that Soviet power in Russia was more secure since the November armistice had ended World War I and that the terms of the peace obliged German troops to withdraw from the Russian territories they had occupied as a result of the punitive Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that they had imposed on the new Soviet state in March 1918. Izvestia contrasted May 1919 to 1918: “On May the First the year before, [the Soviets] had been threatened by German imperialism, [now] it had been routed and dispersed.” In the spring of 1919, the historical tide seemed to have turned in socialism’s favor and a wave of revolution swept across Europe. In his speech, Lenin reminded the demonstrators in Moscow that “the emancipated working class was triumphantly celebrating its festival freely and openly not only in Soviet Russia, but also in Soviet Hungary, and in Soviet Bavaria.”8 Lenin connected the workers in Moscow to their comrades in “Red Petrograd and in Budapest” and announced the liberation by the Soviet Red Army of Sevastopol in the Crimea to a lengthy ovation. Such Red Army victories against the forces of what he called “Anglo-French imperialism” showed that the enemies of Soviet power “would certainly be unable to resist the united forces of Soviet Russia, Hungary, and Bavaria.”9 In closing, Izvestia reported, “Lenin expressed his confidence in the final victory of Soviet power all over the world and exclaimed, ‘Long live the world Soviet republic! Long live communism!’”

For the crowds cheering Lenin in Moscow, as well as for those who desperately feared the spread of communist revolution, May Day 1919 seemed to mark a new era in world history, signaled in part by the revolutions in Budapest and Munich.

Yet while Lenin confidently addressed the crowd on Red Square and spoke of workers’ victories, the Bavarian Soviet collapsed, along with the hopes of Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership that this German revolution was a sign of a turning tide for world revolution.10 Armed forces of the German central government and volunteer counterrevolutionary militias marched into “Red

8 Ibid. 9 Ibid. 10 The Russian word “soviet” means “council” in English. The German is “Rat” and the Hungarian “tanács.” The 1919 revolutionary governments, following the example of the Russian revolutions and the usage of the new Soviet Union, called themselves council governments (Räteregierung, Tanácsköztársaság). I will use soviet (lower case) as a synonym for council and the German and Hungarian equivalents in English, and Soviet (capitalized) for the USSR, or, as here, when part of a proper or colloquial name for the Central European revolutionary governments.
Munich” on May 1, and by midday, the city had fallen. While Lenin boasted to the crowds in Moscow that German imperialism had been “routed and dispersed,” German counterrevolutionary forces were busy defeating the Bavarian revolutionary government and its Red Army. Far from Lenin’s May Day vision of the workers of Central Europe “demonstrating their strength,” the communist-led soviet government in Munich was easily overwhelmed. Counterrevolutionary forces killed more than 600 people in the first week of May in Munich, most of them workers or “red” soldiers, including fifty-three Russian prisoners of war. The defeat of the Bavarian council government brought an end to the postwar revolutions in Germany; the progress of the world revolution suffered a serious defeat.

In his speech, Lenin had optimistically talked about the allied military force of the three socialist states of Bavaria, Hungary, and Russia. In truth, the Hungarian Revolution was more important for the Bolshevik leadership ideologically, as a symbol of the spread of world revolution, than it ever could be militarily or strategically. The example of the Hungarian Revolution proved to the world that their victory in Russia was not a fluke of history. Soviet-style government could also succeed in more industrially advanced European countries such as Hungary, where, Lenin claimed in an article in Pravda, “the general cultural level of the population is higher” and “the proportion of industrial workers to the total population is immeasurably greater” than in Russia. Another historically important aspect of the spring 1919 revolutions in Hungary and the southern German province of Bavaria, according to Lenin, was that they had been largely peaceful, with no violence in the transfer of power to the soviets. This was important, he argued in Pravda, because the ongoing civil war in Russia made many observers associate revolution and soviet power with violence. In his words, “blind people, fettered by bourgeois prejudices . . . confused certain specific features of Russian soviet government, of the history of its development in Russia, with Soviet government as an international phenomenon. The Hungarian proletarian revolution is helping the blind to see.”

In other words, the Central European revolutions were important to the idea of world revolution because they showed that soviet government could be established in places very different from tsarist Russia, without the violence of the Russian example.

In fact, the soviet revolution had been both popular and bloodless in Hungary, with the exception of the murder of the conservative Prime Minister István Tisza, which leaders of the revolutionary government had neither organized nor ordered. In March 1919, the provisional government in Budapest collapsed when the terms of the Treaty of Trianon, prepared in Paris, with its huge territorial losses for Hungary, were announced. Governing in the

name of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils, and riding a wave of popular outrage at the Entente, a new soviet government of communists and socialists, led by the journalist and former prisoner of war in Russia, Béla Kun, took over power. As Lenin announced in a radio speech at the time of the Hungarian soviet revolution in late March, “The bourgeoisie voluntarily surrendered power to the Communists of Hungary.” In a comment which could also be seen as justification for his own party’s October Revolution, Lenin said that the Hungarian example proved “to the whole world that when a grave crisis supervenes, when the nation is in danger, the bourgeoisie is unable to govern. And there is only one government that is really a popular government,” a soviet government.13

Although the Bavarian revolutionary government had already collapsed by May Day 1919, the soviet government in Hungary, embattled and fighting on several fronts, survived through the summer. Writing later in May 1919, after the Bavarian revolution’s defeat, Lenin praised Soviet Russia’s remaining ally: “Hungarian Workers! Comrades! You have set the world an even better example than Soviet Russia.” Acknowledging the struggle of the fledgling Hungarian soviet government against counterrevolutionary forces, who were fighting with the approval (if not the actual assistance) of the French-led Entente, Lenin called on Hungary’s workers to “be firm” in “[your] most gratifying and most difficult task of holding your own in a rigorous war against the Entente.”14 Because of the civil war in his own country, Lenin could offer no military support from the Russian Red Army, but he offered the Hungarians moral and ideological support, telling them, “You are waging the only legitimate, just and truly revolutionary war ... a war for the victory of socialism. All honest members of the working class all over the world are on your side. Every month brings the world proletarian revolution nearer.”15 But instead of world revolution, the summer months of 1919 brought the defeat of the Hungarian revolution. In late June the soviet government withstood an attempted counterrevolution in Budapest during the meeting of the national Congress of Soviets, but by August the forces of the counterrevolution had “routed and dispersed” the Red Army all over the country and the revolutionary government fled from the capital, ending for good the brief moment of international soviet revolution proclaimed by Lenin in his May Day speech.

In Moscow there has long been a commemorative plaque on the building from which Lenin announced his greetings to revolutionaries in Hungary at the end of the world war. No similar plaque adorns a wall in Budapest to commemorate this moment of seeming world revolution. In fact, after the end of

14 Pravda 115, May 29, 1919, in ibid., 391.
15 Ibid.