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## **Ritual and National Self-Interpretation:**

### ***The Nagy Imre Funeral***

On 16<sup>th</sup> June 1989, Prime Minister Nagy Imre<sup>1</sup> of Hungary was buried with full honours. He had died thirty-one years before. Nagy became premier and the country's leader during the 1956 uprising against Communist rule. Soviet military power, formally invited by the counter-government of Kádár János, who was to give his name to the next thirty-three-year era in the country's history, soon crushed the revolution, and after a show trial its leaders were executed in 1958. Since the legitimacy of the Kádár regime rested on the lawfulness and justifiability of the retaliations after 1956, the interpretation of the upheaval and its aftermath was strictly controlled and the memory of its leaders and casualties forcibly suppressed, which included their unceremonious interment in unmarked graves. When they were finally accorded the long overdue last rites after more than thirty years, the occasion marked the end of an era in a more than merely symbolic sense.<sup>2</sup>

It has been widely recognised over the last decade and a half that the Nagy Imre funeral was a major stage, perhaps *the* central event, in Hungary's transition to a multiparty democracy and a genuine constitutional state. What has not yet been offered is an explanation of what it owed its effectiveness to and how it functioned. This paper seeks to rectify the omission. Simply put, I contend that the funeral's significance and transforming power were rooted in its ritual qualities. It succeeded *because* it was a ritual, by which I mean, without wishing to claim exclusive rights for the interpretation or wanting to enter the theoretical debate concerning the term, an event of formalised interactions, marked off from its context spatially and temporally, which both stands for itself and also points beyond itself—where 'pointing' is meant in a strong sense of 'creating' and 'participating in' a reality. It is precisely in the ritual's ability to hold both sides with their irreducible tension together that a key to its efficacy can be found. Intentions and interpretations differed both before and during the funeral (as well as after it, but I shall not be concerned with the aftermath of the event). Its significance lay not so much in representing a compromise between them as in allowing them in a controlled way to interact—while, of course, not failing in its primary task of properly dispatching some corpses whose presence had been greatly disturbing for the community of the living. In the following analysis, I will show in detail how the Nagy Imre funeral managed to become a powerful political demonstration while not ceasing to be an intimate act of mourning; how it reached back to 1956 and went beyond it, how it both tapped into a rich current of Hungary's historical consciousness and reshaped it creatively through an interplay of root metaphors; how it provided space for contestation and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I observe the Hungarian convention of writing 'last names' (family names) first and 'first names' (given names) last.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Tomcsányi Laura for much more than indispensable technical assistance in gathering the sources as well as to William J. Abraham and Dávidházi Péter for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper and encouraging me to continue with the project.

contained the rivalry; how it was a rite of passage for both the dead and the living. The interpretation, however, presupposes some basic familiarity with the particulars of the event as well as its larger context to which we must first turn.<sup>3</sup>

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We should properly begin our sketchy overview of national history, without which the Nagy Imre funeral cannot be understood, with AD 896, the traditional date of the Hungarian forefathers' settlement in the Carpathian Basin, but 1526 will serve as a more practicable starting point. That is the date of the, literally, proverbial battle of Mohács against the Ottoman Empire, the symbolic beginning of Hungary's historical troubles. The battle was lost, and fifteen years later (1541) the Turks, as the Ottoman power is usually if somewhat inaccurately referred to in Hungarian historiography, occupied the capital city of Buda, which was only recaptured a century and a half later (1686) when the Hapsburgs, into whose hands the Hungarian crown had fallen in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, finally managed to push the Sublime Porte's sphere of interest back to the Balkans. The better half of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the country's history are referred to as the age 'between two pagans.' The Turks qualified for one by virtue of their Muslim religion, and the Austrians, whose oppressive measures were not a bit more welcome, were considered worse than heathens.

Popular memory holds that Hungary has won no wars since Mohács—but there has been a rich history of uprisings. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, Hapsburg imperial policy repeatedly provoked unrest, aristocratic conspiracies and occasionally armed resistance, which at the same time helped maintain the country's relative independence. After the struggles of Bocskai István (1604-1606), Bethlen Gábor (1619-1626), Rákóczi Görög I (1643-1645), Wesselényi Ferenc (1664-1671) and Thököly Imre (1678-1687), Duke Rákóczi Ferenc II led a major fight (1704-1711) against the Austrians when the country's unity had been restored by driving out the Ottomans. The less significant conspiracy of the Hungarian Jacobins (1794) was followed in 1848-1849 by what ultimately turned into a war of independence, complete with the dethroning of the Hapsburgs and the declaration of a republic. As usual, it was ultimately defeated by Austrian military might, this time with no insignificant aid from the Russian tsar. After the surrender of the Hungarian army, despite previous promises to the contrary, Vienna launched a cruel program of bloody retaliation. It began with the execution of thirteen generals of the Hungarian army in Arad (today in Rumania) and of the country's first prime minister, Count Batthyány Lajos, in Pest on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1849. The measures prompted passive resistance on the Hungarian side and effectively froze Austro-Hungarian relations until the Compromise of 1867.

What began at Mohács, the battle of 1526, was a new historical era in which the Hungarian Kingdom gradually lost its importance and, to some extent, independence, and became part of a buffer zone, together with Poland and Bohemia, between two major military powers: first the Hapsburgs then the German Third Reich in the west, and the Ottoman, later the Russian and most recently the Soviet Empires in the (south)east. Political

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<sup>3</sup> Details of the funeral itself come from personal experience and the major Hungarian dailies (*Magyar Nemzet*, *Népszabadság*, *Népszava*) published on and after the day of the funeral (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> June 1989). They provided detailed coverage of the ceremony and published the unedited text of the speeches. I shall omit further references to sources except in case of verbatim quotations (translation is mine throughout) or information that was not publicly available at the time.

decisions fatefully influencing the country were made outside it: history began to ‘happen’ to Hungarians. All that was left within the nation’s power was the occasional break-out. Of them all, 1848 became paradigmatic. In a very real sense, it was the culmination and consummation of all previous history of resistance. It was also the most sweeping one in constitutional, sociological and military terms. Perhaps even more important, it was the culmination and consummation of the Age of Reform (1825-1848), which witnessed, as all over Europe, the rise of the modern nation. A last, but in the present context perhaps central, reason for the richness of 1848 as symbol is the fact that several of its famous demands summarised in ‘Twelve Points,’ including national sovereignty, freedom of the press, and amnesty for political prisoners, remained valid well into the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although presented through the distorting lens of Communist ideology of class struggle, this rich history of opposition to the absolutistic imperial policy of a foreign power and the legacy of 1848 were part of standard Hungarian historical knowledge. The names, dates and events every schoolchild had to learn. More important, the pattern of recurrent resistance to oppression became an established feature of national identity: for Hungarians, their history exhibits a ‘syndesmotoc structure.’<sup>4</sup> Westerners whose country’s history exhibits a more organic pattern of development may find it difficult to grasp the Hungarian outlook, but the Nagy Imre funeral of 1989 cannot be properly understood without it.

2

There is a more immediate history leading up to the reburial. From 1957 on, the re-established Communist power reacted with bloody retaliations to the uprising. Apart from members of the ‘Nagy Group,’ many others were also tried, sentenced and imprisoned in processes that came to be called ‘conceptual trials,’ for they were preconceived: the verdict (and often the sentence) decided before the trial ever begun. Executions, well over 200 in all, were carried out as late as 1961 although by then some ‘perpetrators’ had been pardoned, including such prominent figures as Donáth Ferenc, who had received a twelve-year sentence in the Nagy Imre trial, and writer Déry Tibor. The last prisoners were not freed until 1974 or possibly later although most convicts received amnesty in 1963 when the party leadership yielded to international pressure and General Secretary U Thant of the United Nations visited Hungary.

As noted in the introduction, the legitimacy of the Kádár regime rested on the defensibility of crushing the uprising and of the retaliation. That was maintained, on the one hand, by declaring the ‘regretful October events,’ as they were once called, a counter-revolution (Communist ideology valued revolution very high, and, consequently, counter-revolutions were equally vehemently condemned) and, on the other hand, by locking, quite literally, the skeleton in the cupboard and silencing any public memory of the dead. The official interpretation and the *damnatio memoriae* remained unshakeable almost to the very end.

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<sup>4</sup> The term, developed by Lawrence Sullivan in the context of calendrical cycles, designates a unit ‘whose separate [elements] are joined by breaks’ (*Incachu’s Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1988) 226). In other words, in an ironic reversal (so characteristic of Sullivan’s understanding of ritual) the breaking points constitute the link. Interruptive moments mark those points around which experience can be organised and through the analogy of ‘a hole at the centre’ they can be combined into larger units. We will see how quite literal representations of that structure became central symbols at the Nagy Imre funeral.

So much so that although Kádár himself was effectively removed from power in May 1988 when he became President of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP)<sup>5</sup> and Grósz Károly succeeded him as First Secretary, the politburo decided to disallow any demonstration on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the executions in the following month, except in the cemetery where, the members recognised, any police action could only backfire.<sup>6</sup> However, the erection of a *kopjafa*, a sculpted commemorative pole, was prevented even there by taking the object (and its guardians) into police custody before the event.<sup>7</sup> It was only at the symbolic grave of Nagy in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris that the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary could be freely observed. Yet exactly one year later, members of the Cabinet stood guard of honour at the side of Prime Minister Nagy's coffin, and 301 *kopjafák* were erected in the cemetery.

In the intervening period, the story must be seen as developing, broadly speaking, on and from two constantly interacting sides whose contest shaped the final form of the reburial. On the one hand, a Committee for Historical Justice (TIB) had been founded in the spring of 1988 by survivors of '56 and victims' relatives.<sup>8</sup> It had called for gestures of public remembrance already before the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In the following months, it continued pressing, together with a number of other groups, notably the National Association of Political Prisoners (POFOSZ) and what would later turn out to be the first parties in the freely elected Parliament of 1990, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), and the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz), for the exhumation and reburial of the corpses. These groups became the primary organisers of the funeral. On the other hand, the MSZMP set up an ad hoc committee in June 1988 to re-examine 1956, whose chair, a leading and powerful reform Communist, Minister of State Pozsgay Imre made a groundbreaking pronouncement early in 1989 calling 1956 a 'popular uprising': an unprecedented gesture from a representative of the party elite. By the end of 1988, the political decision had also been made to return the identifiable remains of the executed leaders to their families.

Within that matrix, the main bone of contention between the two sides, each heterogeneous in and of itself whose internal debates need not concern us here, was the extent to which the reburial should be a family affair and/or a political event.<sup>9</sup> In emphasising the return of the remains as a humanitarian concession to the exclusion of legal and political rehabilitation, the party was fighting, ultimately also against its own reformists, a losing battle. During the whole process and its aftermath, the MSZMP tried to keep the mollifying themes of 'last rites,' 'national mourning' and 'reconciliation' in the centre. Their efforts did not prove futile, especially since nobody wanted to deny those aspects, but they failed to *limit* the event to an apolitical cemetery ritual. The opposition gradually recognised

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<sup>5</sup> MSZMP was the new name of the reorganised Hungarian Communist party (formerly MDP, i.e., Hungarian Workers' Party) from 1956. The presidential office had not existed before 1988 and was created as a 'holding place' for Kádár.—I shall preserve the Hungarian acronyms for political parties and organizations while providing a translation of their full names.

<sup>6</sup> See the minutes of the 14<sup>th</sup> June meeting in Kenedi János, *Kis állambiztonsági olvasókönyv: október 23.–március 15.–június 16. a Kádár-korszakban* (2 vols., Budapest: Magvető, 1996) 2:201-05. The decisions were enforced; the demonstration in the city was dispersed by occasionally brutal police force. For the then official version of the events, see the state security report in Kenedi 2:210-14.

<sup>7</sup> Kenedi 2:212-14.

<sup>8</sup> This was the time when civil society began to reorganise itself. Voluntary associations, some of them still half-legal, started mushrooming.

<sup>9</sup> A rich documentary history of the MSZMP decisions is provided by Kenedi 2:219-411.

the larger symbolic potential of the act and pushed for a staging that could accommodate *both* a civic liturgy or memorial service *and* a large-scale political demonstration. In the months leading up to the funeral, the party was steadily losing ground and had to make concessions at virtually every turn. The end result was a twofold structure for the event, devised by the opposition, with a grand public tribute to the dead lying in state in a highly prominent location of the city followed by a comparatively 'private' burial ceremony in the more remote cemetery.

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First, however, the corpses had to be provided for the funeral. On 4<sup>th</sup> November 1956, when the Soviet army began its offensive, three of the five people commonly known as the dead of the Nagy Imre trial and reburied in 1989, fled to the Yugoslavian embassy in Budapest and applied for political asylum. They included Prime Minister Nagy, his secretary Szilágyi József, and a minister of his cabinet, Losonczy Géza. A few weeks later, when they voluntarily emerged with a safe conduct granted by the new authorities, the bus that carried them and other refugees was taken by the Soviets, and they were deported to Rumania. The remaining two members of the group, Minister of Defence General Maléter Pál and journalist Gimes Miklós were arrested by the Soviets separately, on 3<sup>rd</sup> November and 5<sup>th</sup> December 1956, respectively.<sup>10</sup> After the consolidation of power (including scores of executions), a party decree was issued on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1957 ordaining swift penal procedures against participants in the uprising. As a result of his hunger strike, Losonczy, who should have been the no. 2 defendant in the Nagy trial, died in prison shortly before Christmas. Szilágyi, who had refused any cooperation with the authorities, was tried separately and executed on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1958. Only the other three figures were sentenced to death in the Nagy Imre trial proper on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1958 and executed the following day.<sup>11</sup>

What had happened to the corpses was not quite clear, by the late 1980s, even to the authorities. It was an open secret that political prisoners had been buried in unmarked graves in and around Lot 301 of Budapest's New Public Cemetery (Új Köztemető). Needless to say, gravesites can be powerful political symbols. There is no doubt that by not returning the bodies to the families despite their repeated requests, and keeping access to Lot 301 under strict control for decades, the Communist regime tried to eliminate such hazard. It was a danger clearly recognised by Kádár's successors, too, when they opted for allowing relatives to receive the remains of the executed.<sup>12</sup> But where exactly those remains were to be found, nobody knew. So the search began for the bodies. The exhumation lasted for weeks, and there were times when it promised to be a failure.

One of the themes that emerged more and more prominently in the spring months as the details of the unearthing became publicly known was prompted by the inhumanity attendant upon the first burial. 'The most embarrassing moment of the exhumation,' said Under-Secretary of State Borics Gyula of the Ministry of Justice in a press conference the day before the funeral, 'was when it appeared that Nagy Imre and two of his fellow martyrs

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<sup>10</sup> Maléter, once again in a breach of trust, was arrested while negotiating, as member of a parliamentary delegation, with the Soviets on the eve of the invasion.

<sup>11</sup> For short biographies of the five figures in Hungarian, see Rainer M. János, 'A Nagy Imre-per halottai,' [http://www.historia.hu/archivum/2004/0410rainer\\_nagy\\_i.htm](http://www.historia.hu/archivum/2004/0410rainer_nagy_i.htm) (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> April 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kenedi 2:226.

had not been originally buried in Lot 301.<sup>13</sup> They were interred in the prison yard, their tombs covered with some rubble, and only in 1961 were they removed to Lot 301 of Új Köztemető, where they were buried, under pseudonyms and false identities but still in unmarked graves, with the rest of the victims. Thus, ironically, the 1989 funeral was the third time they had been laid to rest. The bodies, contrary to all European burial customs, were turned face down in the coffins which, moreover, were of a uniform size so the taller dead could not properly fit in them. Those bodies had to be so bent as to make it possible to force the caskets shut.

The additional inhumanity with which the corpses had been treated provoked widespread condemnation when it became known. The denial of decent burial as a basic human right (not in the constitutional but in the far more deeply rooted religious sense), perhaps the ultimate symbol of political tyranny since Sophocles' *Antigone* in European culture, proved a dangerous weapon that turned against its wielder. It greatly contributed to a situation, which the opposition sought to create, where a service of commemoration and mourning almost par excellence became a political demonstration. The 1989 funeral emphatically became the last rites for the individual, his due by the simple fact that he was a human being. Given the circumstances, however, that itself amounted to a protest against MSZMP rule. The party did all within its power to disseminate the idea of 'reconciliation' and to prevent any unrest that might pose a challenge to its monopoly,<sup>14</sup> apparently without recognising that, especially in the light of the treatment the corpses had previously received, the most powerful challenge the opposition could pose was not by unrest but by a calm, serene, respectful commemoration. And the Nagy Imre funeral was carefully orchestrated to drive the political message home without degrading the burial to a means of self-aggrandisement by aspiring political groupings. That, I suggest, would have been impossible, had the event not been a genuine ritual.

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Prime Minister Nagy's life (and those of the other four named victims buried with him) would deserve a fuller treatment than I can accord it here. However, it must be pointed out that his person was one of the themes unifying broad sections of society. With a slight pun it might be said that he embodied a kind of national consensus at the funeral. A premier is usually not the head of state. Nor are modern presidents identical with the body politic as hereditary monarchs once were. Yet in 1956 Nagy sided with and became the leader of the uprising which itself brought most of the nation together against a foreign power. An element of civil war complicated, of course, the picture insofar as the frontline was drawn between Communist hardliners and the rest of the nation, the former supported by the Soviets. At the beginning of the formal ceremony in 1989, right after the national anthem, a short speech that Nagy had broadcast on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1956 was replayed from a tape. 'Hungarian Sisters and Brothers! Patriots! Faithful Citizens of the Nation! Save the achievements of the revolution, secure order with all your might, re-establish mutual trust. Let no more fraternal blood be shed in the nation.'<sup>15</sup> The prime minister had been calling for national unity.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Fokozott figyelem előzi meg a nemzeti gyásznapot,' *Magyar Nemzet*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1989, p.3. The two other corpses were those of Maléter and Gimes, who were executed together with Nagy.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., the top secret 'Sajtóterv' (Media Plan) of the state security forces in Kenedi 2:280-82.

<sup>15</sup> 'Gyászszertartás a Hősök terén és a 301-es parcellában,' *Népszabadság*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1989, p.3.

It must also be noted that Nagy was an active Communist most of his adult life. Originally taken there as a POW in 1916, he spent, with interruptions, more than 15 years in the Soviet Union before returning, like most Communist leaders at the end of World War II, to Hungary with a commission from the Soviet Communist Party. He held high legislative, government and party offices. An agricultural expert, he became widely known as the 'minister of land distribution' for overseeing the land reform program. Before very long, however, he confronted the Rákosi group, the most powerful political clique in the Hungary of the late 1940s and early '50s, and was forced to resign. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became prime minister and used his power to inaugurate a policy of raising living standards and to end political persecution and shut down forced labour camps. Two years later he had to resign again and was discharged from the party. He was readmitted shortly before the beginning of the uprising in October 1956. The escalating events propelled him to the highest leadership position. Finally subduing Communist party allegiance to national interests, he legalised a multi-party system, declared the country's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, initiated negotiations for the international recognition of Hungary's neutrality and demanded the departure of the Soviet army from the country. All of those issues, none of them yet achieved, were high on the opposition's political agenda in 1989.

Finally, he represented national unity in another sense. In his funeral speech, Méray Tibor spoke of Nagy Imre as a Minister of Agriculture who had distributed land to small holders, who had been a factory worker, a member of the working class, who had become 'a learned researcher, economist, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' and who was therefore honoured by the representatives of 'literature, the press, the academic world, public education,' and as the one who had first uttered 'the heretic word *small-Hungarians*'<sup>16</sup> to a group of young people and was now esteemed by the young born after his death.<sup>17</sup>

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The funeral took place in one of the largest squares of the city. It was constructed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as part of the commemoration of the country's millennial history. Its name (Hősök tere) means 'Heroes' Square' in English. The symbolic grave of the unknown soldier is erected in its centre, but its most prominent feature (apart from two massive museum buildings on either side) is the Millennial Monument. Among other things, the structure houses twice seven<sup>18</sup> statues of national leaders. Eight of them are kings, all from before 1526. The remaining six include Regent Hunyadi János, a legendary and victorious army commander against the advancing Ottomans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, four 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century aristocrats renowned for their leadership in the campaigns against Austrian power (all named in section 1 above) and Kossuth Lajos, the leader of the radicals in 1848-1849 and the first president during Hungary's brief republican period before the collapse of the War of Independence. The monument, constructed in the golden age of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (following the Compromise of 1867), had no room for any of the Hapsburgs. Only for rebel Hungarians. Orchestrating the funeral in this place was no accident. Another, even

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<sup>16</sup> Strictly speaking, the word does not exist in Hungarian. It denotes ordinary everyday people.

<sup>17</sup> 'Gyászszertartás a temetőben,' *Népszava*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1989, p.4.

<sup>18</sup> The number is symbolic as it corresponds to the traditional number of Hungarian tribes settling in the Carpathian Basin in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century.

bigger, square nearby could have been picked. It was not, however.<sup>19</sup> And the reasons were not purely practical. It was the locale where the military parades, modelled on the 7<sup>th</sup> November celebrations in Moscow, used to be held. Instead, the funeral was placed at the other spot, where the nation memorialised its resistance, not its submission, to foreign rule. The place itself was a reminder of the resistance paradigm. And it was also halfway between the court house and prison, on the one hand, where the victims had been tried and held until their last morning as well as where the legal identification of their remains had recently taken place, and Lot 301, on the other, where they had been and were to be again interred. Hősök tere was in the middle, symbolically centred between past and future, recent and distant, as was the event it accommodated.

The façade of one of the museums was covered with black and white drapes (the colours of mourning in Hungary), and an additional structure was erected in front of it. The whole stage resembled a (perhaps weather-beaten) boat, whose sail-and-flag-in-one had a hole in the middle. While part of the symbolism is most probably cross-cultural, it bears pointing out that the boat metaphor emphasised mutual dependence and community. Those in the boat are together, for better or worse, succeeding or perishing all alike. The elements to be fought against are the storms of history. Other parts of the symbolism are less transparent. The Hungarian flag is red-white-green tricolour without further embellishment. After the Communist takeover in 1948, however, the new coat of arms (complete with the red star) had been added on it.<sup>20</sup> That hated symbol was cut out of the flags during the 1956 uprising, and never replaced again.<sup>21</sup> Thus the flag with the hole had become and remained a symbol of the revolution. Many brought such flags to the funeral though they were clearly new ones, originally without the coat of arms, in and of themselves not requiring the operation. But their symbolic significance surpassed that of the state flag by far. Lastly, the structure recalled that which had been erected at the symbolic grave of Nagy in Paris a year earlier thereby uniting the two sites. It also paid homage to those emigrants who had kept the memory of the revolution alive in the West (partly by dedicating that other monument), and in a small way healed the breach in the nation by bringing together, as did the event in a more physical way, emigrants, dissidents and the majority of the people.<sup>22</sup>

The stage was designed by Rajk László, Jr. His story, or rather his father's, must be briefly told to draw out yet another layer of historic symbolism. Rajk László, Sen.'s life became the paradigm of 'Communist martyrdom.' He was another member of the underground movement before and during World War II, and quickly became a prominent political figure after it. He succeeded Nagy as Interior Minister of the coalition government in 1946. After the Communist takeover in '48, he was appointed Foreign Minister. He remained a Cabinet member till '49 when he was arrested. In what set the paradigm of the later show trials, he became the first victim of the Communist party's ever-increasing

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<sup>19</sup> I have not found any evidence that it had ever been considered at all, unlike, say, Kossuth tér, the square of the Hungarian Parliament. To that extent my argument here is hypothetical, but it does not invalidate the main point: the place's symbolic significance was obviously a determining factor in the selection of the venue. Felvonulási tér was altogether unthinkable.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the flags of the two Germanys in the Cold War era.

<sup>21</sup> The Kádár regime was content to fill the hole with the three colours and return to the traditional simple form.

<sup>22</sup> At the time of the Soviet invasion in 1956, an estimated 200,000 people fled for the West before the country's Austrian border was sealed off again.



alertness to the enemy within.<sup>23</sup> However, there are further details to register. In the mid-1950s, as political unrest was growing in the country, his rehabilitation became a highly pressed-for demand of the reformers. Their wish was granted, a decision of the Supreme Court declared the original trial unlawful, and Rajk was reburied as a martyr killed by the unjustness of the system. Significantly, the funeral took place on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1956, the anniversary of the 'Arad Thirteen.' Reporting of the event, *Szabad Nép* (ironically, 'free people') the most influential daily at the time, controlled as were all papers by the Communists, ran a headline reading 'Never Again.' Three weeks later a paramilitary group of the Communist party opened fire on peaceful unarmed demonstrators at the Parliament building.

Various details of this story, especially those pertaining to the funeral, were repeatedly recalled during the 1989 ceremony. The parallels were alarmingly clear. Beyond what must by now be obvious to the reader, I want to draw attention to the wider circumstances. In both cases, practically the same administration (the Rákosi and the Kádár-Grósz regimes, respectively) that had destroyed them, now turned their victims into martyrs. History had repeated itself. There was no assurance that it would not keep on doing so.<sup>24</sup> In June 1989, the Berlin wall still stood erect. The Warsaw Pact still existed. The Tienanmen Square demonstrations had just been crushed by tanks in China. And the Soviet Union still maintained its military presence in Hungary. The Red Army had not left the country since 1956. On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1989, *Népszabadság*, the successor of *Szabad Nép*,<sup>25</sup> published a summary of an ABC interview with Prime Minister Németh Miklós. It appeared on the front page, immediately under the report of the previous day's ceremony. The headline read, 'The Brezhnev Doctrine Belongs to the Past: Hungary's Neutrality Is Not Topical.' The Nagy Imre funeral offered a stage for ritualised contestation. And the stakes were high: the country's future.

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The day of the funeral consciously resonated with the day of the execution in more ways than one. It was, first of all, the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary. The motorcade carrying the coffins arrived at Hősök tere at 5 o'clock in the morning: the same time as the victims' last walk, to the gallows.

Five coffins were placed side by side on the steps of the museum and a sixth above them in the middle. The five contained the remains of Gimes Miklós, Losonczy Géza, Maléter Pál, Nagy Imre, and Szilágyi József. The sixth casket was empty. It represented all other victims of the Communist system. The hundreds of people who had been executed but whose remains had not yet been exhumed then and returned to their families, those who died during the fighting, in prison or in labour camps. In its emptiness, it became the richest symbol.<sup>26</sup> In what turned out to be the most important speech of the ceremony, the youngest speaker Orbán Viktor (Fidesz) drew past and future together into that empty space of the present. 'Indeed then, in 1956, did the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party rob us—the

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<sup>23</sup> From a strictly historical perspective, this sentence would require further qualification. From a ritual-symbolic point of view, the designation nevertheless holds.

<sup>24</sup> And now we indeed know that the police stood prepared to use coercive measures had the demonstration taken a hostile turn to Communist party rule.

<sup>25</sup> The title is not much less ironic; it means 'popular freedom.'

<sup>26</sup> Recall also the stage design, the mutilated flag and Sullivan's notion of syndesmotoc structure (n.4, above).

young of today—of our future. Therefore in the sixth coffin lies not only a murdered young man but also our next twenty, or who knows how many, years.<sup>27</sup>

But this is to jump ahead. The day's program began at 9 am when people started laying flowers before the coffins. At 10 am an announcement signed by the victims' relatives, the TIB, POFO SZ, and several other political organizations opposed to the still ruling Communists, was read. Among other things which need not detain us here, it designated the day as a day of national mourning and remembrance. It invited the nation to join in the commemoration by stopping and drivers sounding the horns of their vehicles when bell tolling announced country-wide the beginning of the ceremony proper at 12:30 pm. The significance of the manifesto lay partly in offering symbolic ways of participation in the event to those not physically present and thereby extending the efficacy of the ritual far beyond its geographic limitations, and partly in the list of signatures at the bottom. It was not the government or some agency of state or party bureaucracy but individuals and voluntary associations that supported it. It was an initiative decidedly independent of the political establishment. And the response was quite uniform. As the media later reported, life had stopped, bells had been tolled, sirens and horns sounded. And of course, there were a quarter of a million people in the square. In a country where the totalitarian system, though crumbling, was still in place, this act both demonstrated that society had begun to make itself independent of the state and effectively contributed to that process. The funeral with everything it entailed was an act of civil society asserting, or establishing, itself.<sup>28</sup> In that, the ceremony again functioned, to borrow Thomas Kasulis's term, as ritual metapragmatics.

At 11 o'clock commenced the wreath laying ceremony. Since participation in this act was the clearest expression of honour and support, it was inevitably a political statement. That it was universally so understood is proved by the fact that omissions were as important as commissions. Prime Minister Nagy's hometown took the lead. Their delegation was followed by those of the Országgyűlés (Parliament) and the government. When they had finished, the members of those delegations replaced the guards of honour and kept that post while the rest of the floral tributes were laid. Prime Minister Németh and Minister of State Pozsgay were joined by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House around Nagy's coffin while MPs guarded the sixth casket. Although most of these people were members of the MSZMP, they strictly represented constitutional branches of the state. However, the Presidential Council<sup>29</sup> was conspicuously absent. Needless to say, the MSZMP was not formally represented. Nagy and the others were recognised as statesmen not as party officials. Once more, civil society was breaking party hegemony, and that included a ritual reconception of the power structure. The order of the first floral tributes is significant. The day began with individuals placing their flowers around the coffins. The first formal delegation represented the local community, Nagy's hometown. It was followed by what was constitutionally if not yet in effect<sup>30</sup> the comprehensive and equal representation of the country's citizenry, and the executive branch had to be content with the third (or fourth,

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<sup>27</sup> Orbán Viktor, 'A hatodik koporsóban a mi elkövetkező húsz évünk is ott fekszik,' *Magyar Nemzet*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1989, p.3.

<sup>28</sup> I will discuss this question more systematically in the concluding section.

<sup>29</sup> It was a typically and emblematically Communist institution. It was a relatively small, hence easily controllable, committee that had the right to make edicts with the legal binding force of acts of Parliament. For all practical intents and purposes, it was at the pinnacle of constitutional hierarchy, at the same time preceding and bypassing traditional institutions of democracy although those were also strictly controlled by the MSZMP.

<sup>30</sup> The first free elections followed almost a year later in spring 1990.

including the less formal early stage) place. Despite all ideology to the contrary, Communist power was organised from top down, not from bottom up. The funeral effected a ritual reversal which was also to have lasting consequences.

One of the most dramatic details of the ceremony featured the roll call of all those executed in retaliation to 1956. The victims' names, occupation and age was read out aloud. The list seemed endless. Most of them were young, and the majority blue-collar workers. Small-Hungarians. The significance of naming the occupation and not, say, the hometown lay in this. The Communist system advertised itself as deriving its legitimacy from the working classes. 'All power belongs to the working people,' declared Soviet-style constitutions. Everybody knew that it was a lie, but the ritual reading of this monotonous and shocking register amounted to the public indictment of that ideology. The entire list was read out once more in the cemetery, under even more ritualised circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

The next group of delegations laid their floral tributes in the name of the various historical religious communities of the country: Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Unitarian, Eastern Orthodox and Jewish, each represented by its highest ranking prelate. Next came the foreign ambassadors and then a great many organizations, including the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and voluntary associations, some of which I mentioned earlier (TIB, MDF, SZDSZ etc.) also including opposition groups from Eastern Block countries. The organising committee clarified it in a press conference the day before the ceremony that nobody had been sent an individual invitation with the exception of those who had attended the symbolic funeral the previous year in Paris. Attendance was thus emphatically voluntary, and the result telling. In case somebody had missed the point, the newspapers reporting on the ceremony listed those countries that had not sent representatives. They included Albania, China, North Korea and Rumania. It was summer 1989.

The central act of the public ceremony began at 12:30 pm with the national anthem and Nagy's short speech quoted above. That was when the country stopped for five minutes. Six speeches followed to which I shall return in the next sections. It is sufficient to note here that no one spoke in their own name, every speaker represented a more or less well-organised group of society, but all of them currently in opposition. There were no speeches by the representatives of political power. With the exception of the last speaker, all of them had somehow been involved in the uprising or calumniated by the previous regime. The sixth was Orbán Viktor, whose speech I have mentioned; he spoke in the name of the young generations. His speech stirred up most commotion; it was the boldest and most outspoken one. The public part of the ceremony was concluded at 1:30 pm with *Festival Overture*, a famous piece by 19<sup>th</sup>-century composer Erkel Ferenc, whose name is closely associated with 1848.

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The second part, the burial proper, began at 3 o'clock in Lot 301. This once forbidden and forgotten ground was being turned into a major sanctuary of national remembrance. Its state was, once more, that of liminality, between and betwixt. It had been opened and made accessible, but many of the dead had not yet been exhumed, identified and reburied with human decency. It was destined to become a shrine of national history and heroism, and, as

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<sup>31</sup> Parenthetically, ritual repetitions were most clearly observable in naming names. The dead were frequently recalled by their names not by other epithets, and the speakers usually called out all five names at least once.

I anticipated above, 301 commemorative poles (*kopjafák*) had been erected at the thitherto unmarked graves in preparation for the funeral.<sup>32</sup> But the main monument had not yet been raised. In fact, the competition for a plan was still open. It would end by the autumn, and the entries exhibited for public access from 23<sup>rd</sup> October till 4<sup>th</sup> November: the dates correspond to the beginning and the end of the 1956 uprising. However, that was all as yet to come. What was now happening was perhaps the single most significant event in the transformation of those grounds.

As compared with the 250,000 gathering in Hősök tere, the ceremony in the cemetery, attended by 2,000, was as close to a small-scale family event as possible. Only relatives and friends were admitted. The emphasis from the political demonstration now shifted to the last rites though both elements were present at both venues of the day, and it is impossible to establish a clear-cut division between the two halves along such lines. The ceremony at the tombs began with the repetition of the roll call. This time a torch bearer stepped forward after each name and extinguished the flame while a friend or relative of the victim said a few words, frequently, 'You remain with us,' or 'You are amongst us.' At the request of those families who wanted religious ceremony, ministers of various denominations consecrated the graves at the commemorative poles.

The Nagy family solicited that the late prime minister be buried among all other casualties of the retaliation. The leaders were numbered among the ordinary people. A further element of democratisation was built into the structure of the final ceremony. There were no speeches given for each individual, apart from the short sentences noted above, only for the five leaders. However, these speeches were delivered when their names were read out on the alphabetical list and their torch was extinguished. One of the five, General Maléter was buried with ecclesiastical liturgy at the gravesite. At the family's request, ministers of the Lutheran church presided at his burial. The person of the homilist<sup>33</sup> is noteworthy in that he was a son of Donáth Ferenc. As a small child he, like other members of the political leaders' families, had been part of the group that was taken with Nagy on the odyssey from the Yugoslavian embassy to Snagov, Rumania and back to Budapest.<sup>34</sup>

To round off the chronology of the day, all six coffins, including the symbolic sixth, were lowered in the graves together at the end of the whole ceremony, which further accentuated the levelling emphasis. Between the last speech and the actual burial, the foundation stone was laid of the monument to be built. A short religious ceremony followed for some of those still in unmarked graves. The lowering of the caskets was accompanied by 'Szózat,' which is almost a second national anthem in Hungary. While its text is perfectly suited for such occasions by emphasising faithfulness to country and land till death, it is also rich with 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition. The frame provided by the 1848 paradigm was complete.

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The central themes of the event's primarily non-verbal symbolism examined above were reiterated (or drawn out) by the dozen or so speeches given at the two venues. A correlation of the two layers, verbal and non-verbal, therefore suggests itself as a particularly helpful

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<sup>32</sup> The number is significant and corresponds to the lot number in the cemetery, which had acquired symbolic significance, not to the number of those executed.

<sup>33</sup> I shall return to his sermon in section 10.

<sup>34</sup> A journey Maléter, incidentally, did not share.

analytical approach. Borrowing Victor Turner's concept of root metaphors,<sup>35</sup> I propose that three were at work at the funeral. The first was the metaphor of 1848. To be more precise, it is a more complex metaphor whose paradigmatic realization is 1848. It is the metaphor of communal resistance to foreign tyranny, armed struggle for constitutional rights and the assertion of national identity. It is probably the most significant political metaphor in Hungary, the pattern being recurrent and constitutive of national self-interpretation. The other two metaphors are curiously secularised versions of basic religious metaphors linked with death, perhaps even *the* most fundamental religious metaphors linked with death. The one is martyrdom; the other is resurrection. The interplay of these three root metaphors determined the particulars of the event.

I detailed the parallels between 1848 and 1956 above. What matters most for my present purpose is their unique correspondence beyond their conformity to the basic paradigm. Such features included the tricolour,<sup>36</sup> Russian involvement, the unjust execution of the prime minister and other leaders, the echoes of 6<sup>th</sup> October through the Nagy-Rajk-Arad Thirteen line, and most prominently their living legacies and the continuing validity of their demands. The last item is the key because what happened in 1989 went way beyond linking 1956 to 1848. Through its identification with 1956 and the further identification of 1956 with the paradigm of 1848, the present was firmly rooted in that rich historic tradition, epitomised by '48. The central issues were in all cases national self-determination, expressed through the concrete demands for genuine parliamentary democracy,<sup>37</sup> independence (withdrawal of the occupying power's army), and economic freedom (capitalist market economy) though the last was formulated in various ways. And the larger political circumstances were also remarkably similar in all three cases. Thus in a sense the real issue was not 1956 but 1848. That was the root metaphor to which 1956 served as a guide. Though Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* could often be heard those days (with reference to another freedom fighter, it was the 'battle hymn' of 1956) the national anthem and Erkel's piece were chosen for the funeral. They bypassed '56 and reached back directly to the 1848 tradition.

It is impossible to enumerate all verbal echoes of 1848 in the speeches. They were everywhere. Most, and certainly what is treasured as best, of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian literature is one way or another associated with 1848. And it was most of all literary allusions, lines or just characteristic phrases from famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century poems that permeated the speeches at the funeral. Let me cite two illustrative instances. One of the speakers concluded his address by quoting the famous refrain<sup>38</sup> from Petőfi's 'Talpra, magyar!' a spirited ode of

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<sup>35</sup> They are fundamental metaphors that 'reach down to irreducible life-stances of individuals, passing beneath conscious prehension to a fiduciary hold on what they sense to be axiomatic values, matters literally of life or death' (156). In other words, on a communal level, they are 'probably concerned with fundamental assumptions underlying the human societal bond with preconditions of *communitas*' (159). See Victor Turner, 'Religious Paradigms and Political Action: The 'Murder in the Cathedral' of Thomas Becket,' *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion* (eds. Frank Reynolds and Dan Capps; The Hague et al.: Mouton, 1976) 153-86.

<sup>36</sup> Red-white-green cockades and the mutilated-restored flag were powerful symbols of 1848 and 1956, respectively. With no other instance of national resistance are variations on the state flag nearly as clearly associated as with these two.

<sup>37</sup> In 1848, the main issue was an independent Hungarian government responsible to the parliament; in 1956 and 1989, a multi-party system and the elimination of undemocratic Communist party control over all branches of state power.

<sup>38</sup> In literal translation, 'We swear that we shall be no longer slaves.'

freedom which the poet, who was to die in a battle of the ensuing War of Independence, read to the crowd from the steps of the National Museum on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1848, the first day of the revolution. Every schoolchild knows both the text and the story. The other example is less in the popular vein. It appeared in print. The leading article of *Magyar Nemzet* on the day of the funeral concluded with another quotation.<sup>39</sup> It was taken from an ode written by Arany János, Petőfi's friend and the foremost poet of the post-1849 era, in commemoration of Count Széchenyi, a dedicated reformer and a minister in Batthyány's cabinet in 1848, who has been called 'the greatest Hungarian.'

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Yet in a major way the paradigm was subverted. In 1989 everybody wanted to avoid bloodshed; a national consensus existed for reform rather than revolution (although the degree of necessary and/or admissible reform was highly contested). Consequently, those aspects of '48 and '56 were drawn out in the speeches. One speaker went so far as to claim that Nagy could only be rightly known if it was recognised that the reform measures achieved and supported by the uprising were the same that Nagy had fought for by constitutional means from 1947-1956. But the real support for peaceful measures derived from another paradigm, that of martyrdom. I outlined the parallel between Rajk László, Sen. and Nagy Imre. There was a crucial difference between them, however. Rajk had been canonised by the very system he had served and which had destroyed him. Nagy, on the other hand, had to die because he realigned his allegiance from party to nation. He conformed to the pattern of martyrdom far more truly by having undergone a manifest 'secular conversion,' remaining faithful to his convictions even unto death.

'Martyrs of Communist tyranny' was a designation at least as frequently employed as 'victims.' Of course, the life and death of these people could not be interpreted as religious martyrdom for lack of their religious convictions. However, the structure of the metaphor was transposed from religious transcendence to national transcendence and kept intact. God's cause was replaced by that of the nation, but characteristic martyr virtues such as faithfulness, quiet firmness, passive and heroic suffering (invested with significant redemptive power within the new matrix) all remained in place. The most recurrent and uniform praise lauded upon Nagy and his peers was the acknowledgement of their ethical greatness. It might be suggested that that was not so much a secularisation of Christian martyrdom as reaching back beyond the Christian layer to the roots lying even deeper in classical antiquity. I would contend that it is not so, or at most, only partially so. I have spoken of the democratic-egalitarian gestures built in the structure and symbolism of the funeral. Roman and Greek heroism is aristocratic even if humility is a classical virtue. Recognising or, from the martyr's point of view, realising greatness through bending down to the lowly, something Nagy was often praised for, is a Christian association. Rácz Sándor invited the crowd to sing a well-known hymn to the Virgin Mary, whom the Catholics venerate as the guardian saint of the country. Furthermore, Méray, from whose long speech I have already quoted, went as far as applying the epithet 'without sin'<sup>40</sup> to Nagy and the other dead while Fónay Jenő coined the phrase 'prison-Golgotha.' That was nothing short of an identification of the victims with the prototypical Christian redemptive martyr Jesus Christ.

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<sup>39</sup> Again, in literal translation, 'A nation's mourning is not only depressing. A people that can so magnify a majestic and great one has faith, right, and strength to live.'

<sup>40</sup> The Hungarian circumlocution 'bűn nélkül való' is an unmistakably liturgical phrase.

The meekness inherent in the martyrdom metaphor successfully served to counterbalance the revolutionary overtones of the 1848 paradigm, but it was integral to the symbolic structure of the day in yet another way. It was not merely a rhetorical device or lack of imagination on the speakers' part that led to the uniform acknowledgement of the victims' ethical stature. The recognition of moral wealth treasured up and bequeathed by 1956, epitomised in its leaders, served again present purposes. That rectitude, integrity and fidelity was the rightful legacy of the present. The legitimacy of the current opposition (those organising the funeral) was possible to derive from it. The unprincipled dishonesty and deceitful baseness of the still ruling regime and its Soviet allies, indicted by allusions to the dangerous parallels between the Rajk funeral and the present event and by the drawn-out roll call of victims as well as by the very occasion, provided the frightful counterpoint to it. Surely, this high claim did not go uncontested. Prime Minister Németh, for example, emphasised the differences between 1956 and 1989, and interpreted them as the result of a long evolution. The implication was clearly the appreciation of the intervening time and thus the legitimisation of the then present government.

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More contested than the past, however, was the future. The third metaphor was most needed here. Death and martyrdom invited the root metaphor of resurrection as did the hope of a new beginning. All the same, resurrection was stripped of its religious significance and transposed in the matrix of national transcendence. It literally became a metaphor, nothing more. The resurrection theme was perhaps the most uniquely verbal in the sense that, beyond a basic structural level, it was confined to the medium of speech. But there it was exploited to the full. There was no speech that did not refer to the future. The whole day was designated a day of remembrance so that the dead could be buried, the past closed, and the future worked for with renewed strength. The leading article in the 16<sup>th</sup> June *Magyar Nemzet*, which concluded with the passage from Arany's ode cited earlier, carried the title 'Resurrection.' There were variations on the theme, of course, but the theme was unmistakable and consistent. The past was being reinterpreted. In a double reversal, what was buried with the bodies of the 1956 victims was the system that had killed them, not the ideals they embodied. The spirit of 1956 was being resurrected by the act of decently burying its corpses. Again, the ideal was national self-determination expressed through concrete demands for pluralistic democracy and political-military sovereignty.

The fulfilment of the individual's life, inherent in the expectation of resurrection, was reinterpreted in the matrix of national resurrection. The life and death of the martyrs were brought to completion and invested with meaning, or their true meaning was revealed, in the new vision for the nation's future. Speakers never tired of making this point, and the commemorative sentences at the second roll call had the same significance. How strongly secularisation affected this quintessentially religious metaphor is witnessed by the sermon at Maléter's grave. Speaking of John 15:13,<sup>41</sup> the preacher emphasised the interrelatedness of love, justice and freedom and their simultaneous presence in the late general's life. Yet the speech failed to openly uphold the transcendental message of the gospel and ended with praising Maléter's faithfulness to nation and land<sup>42</sup> and offered human memory as the

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<sup>41</sup> 'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (RSV).

<sup>42</sup> The verbal echoes of 1848 were once more unmistakable in the Hungarian text.

location of the reality of his continuing life and essence. If there was any allusion to Christian hope in this sermon, it was thrice removed from its customary liturgical-religious expression.

Forgiveness, another explicitly religious layer of the martyrdom metaphor, combined with the notion of resurrection into a major determining factor of the future vision. In fact, it wove all three metaphors together. With the return of the true legacy of the past, the task for the future was twofold. That is to say, the twofold consequence of the truth of '56 had to be drawn out. First, its goals were to be achieved. This required political action. Hence, the funeral was considerably more than last rites. It was at the same time a political demonstration. But the two things were inseparable. Though the present could appropriate the moral legacy of '56, it had to make its own contribution by precisely not reducing the rich texture of the ritual, however secular, into simple political action, let alone violence. The dead had to be in the focal point. Using them as a mere alibi for a political rally would have been insufficient. And their centrality was best preserved by allowing their heritage to mould the vision for the future. Thus the second task was not to demand the punishment of the perpetrators of the retaliation that followed 1956. Almost every speaker explicitly made the point. 1956 was to be remembered, the distinction between victims and executioners not blurred. This entailed political consequences (the resignation of the latter from power and public offices) but no physical or economic retribution. Revenge was to be sacrificed for compromise. It was this magnanimous gesture that ultimately raised 1989 and the future it strove for above the system it sought to replace. The 1848 (1956) paradigm was purged of all violent overtones and its true legacy was recognised, through the interaction with the metaphors of martyrdom and resurrection, in its constitutional ideal which was to be realised, i.e., raised to new life, thanks to the redemptive death of and moral heritage bequeathed by the martyrs of 1956.

What was at work here was a double-twist on the syndesmotoc structure of the nation's historical consciousness. Not only were 1956 and 1848 (and the other instances of freedom fight) linked by the logic of disruptiveness, but 1989 was also linked to that whole cycle by breaking its original pattern. Social and political upheaval did not break into open violence and no blood was shed during the transition period. Thus 1989 established its continuity with the tradition of the wars of independence by reinterpreting them, through the lack of violence, in terms of constitutional struggle and reform rather than those of revolution and armed hostility. The end result of the interplay of the root metaphors thus amounted to a subtle but significant readjustment in the nation's self-understanding.

I have noted that the vision for the future was the primary ground of ritual contestation. The spectrum ranged from the government to, interestingly, the Young Democrats. Although it was mainly a matter of emphasis, the competition is not to be overlooked. In a sense, the theme of conciliation served to unify all positions, but what exactly that entailed was a matter of debate. Those currently in power tried to exploit the conciliatory offer and maintain their own leadership positions (once they were forgiven) in the future. The veterans of 1956 were painfully aware of the concessions the Communists had made to make the funeral possible, and offered their appreciation for their readiness for compromise. While being critical of the regime and the Communist system at large, they painstakingly avoided incensing the powers that be. Orbán's speech, his interpretation of the sixth coffin I have explored, was later criticised for its tactlessness and overly political tone. He spoke in the name of the



generation(s) that had been born after the shock of 1956 and had never really shared Nagy's (and most of the older speakers') once-held Communist convictions. For these young people, there had been no need to undergo conversion. Nor had this generation had to live in an atmosphere of open terror. So Orbán could assert inherent rights to, and not be thankful for, what could not have been achieved without bloodshed had the Communists resorted to violent means to save their power. Thus he said that nobody was to be thanked for granting the right to bury the dead after thirty-one years. 'It is no merit of the Hungarian political leadership,' he continued, 'that, though it could by virtue of its military might, it does not employ methods like those of Pol Pot, Jaruzelski, Li Peng, or Rákosi against those demanding democracy and free elections.'<sup>43</sup> Many thought, accepting the government's reasoning, that it was.

There are, however, other conceptual frameworks in which Orbán's speech can be interpreted. It can be seen as instantiating ritual contestation. While the party elite was pressing the theme of 'national reconciliation,' the actual situation was more complex. The funeral was both the result of a compromise achieved through prior contest and itself a major and, at least with hindsight, decisive, stage in a long contest for power. Orbán's speech was arguably the most prominent manifestation of the latter aspect, but it need not be seen as breaking the rules, for he fully complied with the limits imposed by the situation (if not with those the party leadership would have been glad to impose). Rather, it was a powerful reminder that the authorities had either misunderstood the nature of ritual or underestimated its power because they had not realised that its capacity to *contain*, both in the sense of 'including' and of 'limiting,' contestation did not altogether preclude it. I shall return to Orbán's speech in the last section, but first I want to explore further to what degree containment was constitutive of the ritual.

Just like it was both the result and the enactment of contest, the funeral was also both a result of earlier promises of non-violence and a major enactment of such promise making, for the pointed demonstration of peacefulness can also be seen as the opposition's (and society's) disavowal of unconstitutional means in the future pursuit of political change. It corresponds to the politburo's (and the party's) self-restraint in not holding on to power at all costs. A symbolic expression of that state of affairs was that Nagy and his peers were buried without military honours. The civic ceremony contrasted the violence of their death. The memory of brutal and unrestrained bloodshed in 1956 and the years that followed was now contained by its complete rejection. Guns and military symbolism, evidently linked with the oppressive system the funeral negated, had no place there. All sides agreed to strictly peaceful and democratic rules. Violent enmity (recall the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary) was channelled into political opposition. The future was strongly contested in the particulars, but the political ideal (appropriated from the legacy of 1848 and 1956) and the methods to realise it (peaceful and democratic) were agreed upon. To that degree, there emerged a national consensus.

The funeral's ritual efficacy, I contend, was crucial in that regard. Through its various techniques and symbols, ritual is capable of self-reflexivity. I am borrowing the concept from Lawrence Sullivan, in whose repertory it has a twofold meaning. Ritual is its own discourse, Sullivan maintains, it reflects on itself. 'The meaning of festival actions and symbols are, literally, apparent: they cannot be expressed in any more suitable way than through their

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<sup>43</sup> Orbán p.3.

dramatic appearance as symbolic acts.<sup>44</sup> The other aspect of this ritual quality is reflexivity as an account for the preconditions of the ritual moment. The 1989 funeral was self-reflexive in both senses. On the one hand, it repeatedly recalled, most prominently through the speeches, its own coming into being. Its most recent history, the exhumation of the remains and the organization of the event, was a function of the developing compromise between state and society, political power and popular will, government and opposition. In that sense, the funeral presupposed a certain degree of reconciliation between the opposing parties. On the other hand, it was also creative of that agreement not merely by serving as a catalyst while coming into being but also by fulfilling, simply by successfully and peacefully coming to pass, its own destiny.<sup>45</sup> The event surely depended on a number of preconditions, but it was significantly more than the sum total of its prerequisites. In fact, the dependency between precondition and event was mutual in that not only had the latter been impossible without prior fulfilment of certain conditions, but the preconditions also depended on the event for their existence. It was the event that made them what they were, *preconditions*. The funeral had to take place in order to be effective, but in its realisation it achieved incomparably more than all its preconditions taken together. It enacted, peacefully like never before, what the interplay of the root metaphors expressed verbally, a grand transitional moment that had far-reaching consequences for the life of the nation.

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Prime Minister Nagy and his peers were honoured by the highest ranking officials of the government, but their funeral was not a state funeral proper. The first orator in Hősök tere underlined that the occasion was no official event but a gathering of friends and relatives. This claim was somewhat disingenuous, but had a strong element of truth at its core. Most conspicuously, as I have noted, no form of military symbolism was admissible despite the fact that Nagy and his peers were state dignitaries (Maléter an army general actively engaged in the fighting) and participants in the uprising were, especially in the emigration, often called ‘freedom fighters.’ Moreover, the state itself was allowed to play a very limited part in the event. Of course, it had been a totalitarian state that was assigned a restricted role. Civil society demonstrated or, as I have suggested, created both its independence of and primacy over the state. In that sense, the funeral was conducted with ‘social honours.’

Orbán’s speech with its provocative independence, refusing to give thanks to the political leadership for an act that was its obligation rather than gracious condescension to perform, was a lucid indication of the new ‘social consciousness.’ It caused so much uproar because he was understood as effectively denying the moral value of the government’s faithfulness in keeping its prior promise of non-intervention. His words may, however, be taken in the sense that those in power simply performed their duty in allowing the demonstration to take place: hence, ‘no merit.’ Especially in the light of the great emphasis on the *victims’* moral stature, Orbán can be interpreted as simply insisting that political rather than moral categories were relevant in analysing the actions of the party and government leadership. He was certainly not alone with his view, and a larger significance of the funeral

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Noise, Nakedness, Flood, and Fire: Purification Rites for a Healthy New Year in Modern Japan’ (*Second Opinion: Health, Faith, and Ethics*, 1987: 68-91) 91.

<sup>45</sup> We might also say, appropriating the categories of Austin and Searle’s speech act theory, that the funeral was both the completion of prior perlocutionary acts of promise making and an achievement through the ritualised illocutionary acts of the commemorative speeches.

lay in this. It was a major event in the life of a civil society that had been forcibly kept in a state of minority. It was the coming of age of a people, claiming its lawful inheritance and asserting its rights. Knowing its fathers dead, it renounced paternalising care by a Big Brother. Most of those metaphors appeared during those days even if not in the funeral speeches.

Taken together, the symbolic and metaphoric expressions of societal self-assertion vis-à-vis the state allow for an interpretation of the funeral and its larger context that recognises an overarching ritual pattern. The reburial was self-evidently a rite of passage for the dead. But it was, I submit, also a rite of passage for the whole people. It was the initiation of a nation. That is a strong claim for a people with eleven centuries of history, and I do not wish to push it too far. Nevertheless, the event conformed to the threefold structure of liminal experience<sup>46</sup> and marked, in the sense explained above, the beginning of a new stage in the life of the nation. Interpretations of past and future, we have seen, were central to the event. Some speeches specifically focused on the present as a landmark of the passage from one age to another. Others emphasised the limes between life and death or contrasted the moments of commemoration with the weeks and months of diligent work to come. The three-tiered structure of space, the location of the funeral being half-way between the court house and the cemetery, I also mentioned. Again, people had to come to gather in Hősök tere and then return to their lives. But liminality was most of all guaranteed by the presence of the cadavers. And it was a peculiar presence because they had returned from death and were to go back where they had been. But Lot 301 where they were to be interred again was no longer the same place whence they had been exhumed. In a sense, that was the ultimate situation of liminality.

This meeting of the living with the dead transformed both. The latter became acclaimed national heroes from executed criminals doomed to be forgotten. The former, a nation with a new understanding of the past, with no longer broken or suppressed memories, and with a new sense of self-respect and future. My contention has been that the same result could not have been achieved without the funeral as efficacious ritual. If all histories, metaphors, claims and counter-claims, promise making and promise keeping woven together and brought into creative interplay in the contested yet contained ritual space and time of that event had been possible to join by other means, the dead would still have had to be given their due, the last rites. Since the country's then current political system had been established at the expense of unburied dead, the funeral was a necessary step towards national renewal. In its concrete realisation, it turned out to be the arguably most significant and symbolically undoubtedly richest step on the nation's way to political adulthood.

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<sup>46</sup> Despite the critical debate concerning the details, van Gennep's tripartite model seems widely accepted.