Jewish idealist who, after surviving Auschwitz, dared to believe in Hungarian patriotism and “Communism with a human face.” They led two armed groups in Buda and Pest respectively and kept the Soviet Army at bay for much longer than anyone might have expected. After the revolution was quelled, they were arrested and executed along with more than two hundred other insurgents. Lipták still embraces the ideals of freedom and justice for which they fought, and he concludes the book by expressing the wish that those ideals might be fulfilled by future Hungarian governments.


Reviewed by Adam Tólnay, Georgetown University

What do the father of the sociology of knowledge, the author of Darkness at Noon, the foremost modern theorist of the scientific method, and two brothers who conceptualized the nature of modernity all have in common? Karl Mannheim, Arthur Koestler, Imre Lakatos, and Karl and Michael Polanyi led roughly parallel lives. All were born and educated in Hungary and molded by their direct contact with the twin forces of fascism and Communism. All went on to attain the pinnacles of honor and fame within their respective disciplines following their emigration to the West. They engaged in émigré politics, kept abreast of one another’s work, and helped one another and fellow Hungarian intellectuals to obtain visas, find academic positions, and seek out publishers. They also shared something more profound—a highly intellectualized desire to devise a moral basis for social organization at a time of profound spiritual crisis.

The opening line of Lee Congdon’s meticulously researched and ably written book, Seeing Red: Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism, states forthrightly that “this is an interpretive study of two generations of Hungarian émigré intellectuals.” The book ends with a paragraph infused with wisdom and its handmaiden, remorse:

Not all the subjects of this study moved beyond anticommunism. . . . But wherever they ended their intellectual and spiritual odysseys, they all recognized that Communism offered much needed faith to men and women living in a post-Christian society and confronting the challenges of nihilism.

These bookends suggest that the intervening 185 pages of text recount how two generations of Hungary’s finest minds came to believe in, profess, support, lose faith in, deride, deconstruct, and finally move beyond Communism. This cycle of intellectual and spiritual confrontation with Communism is the framework Congdon uses to structure the elements of his study.

The book is divided into four chapters of roughly thirty pages each—“The Soviet Experiment,” “The War Years,” “The Cultural Cold War,” and “New Émigrés”—plus
an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter corresponds roughly to a distinct period in Hungarian postwar history and is divided into three sections: an exposition of the macrohistory of Europe during the period; an overview of the lives, thoughts, and deeds of the émigré Hungarian intellectuals who were most active at the time; and an in-depth focus on the struggle to come to terms with Communism in the seminal works published by Hungarian writers. Karl Polanyi and his preparations for writing The Great Transformation take center stage in the first chapter. Koestler and his Darkness at Noon raise the historical narrative to the personal and metaphysical level in the second chapter. Koestler and Michael Polanyi illustrate the tensions in thought, feeling, and ideas of the postwar Stalinist years. An analysis of Imre Lakatos and his transformation from murderous leftist to hard line anti-Communist complements the history of changes in Communism and in its critics in the years following the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

If Seeing Red were merely a history of Communism in Central Europe and the intellectual responses to it, it would make an admirable contribution to studies of émigré intellectuals (such as Stefan Korbonski’s Warsaw in Exile) and to the still-burgeoning literature on the seduction and redemption of the Western mind by the promises and failures of Communism (a theme taken up long ago in Czesław Miłosz’s Captive Mind). Yet Seeing Red offers more, indeed much more. It is a book of philosophical depth and wisdom primarily because of two choices Congdon has made. First, he sees Communism not as a set of historically contingent actions taken by Vladimir Lenin, Josif Stalin, Mátyás Rákosi, János Kádár, and others, but as a deeply flawed solution to a metaphysical challenge posed by the rise of nihilism at the onset of modernity. Second, although Congdon introduces an assorted set of Hungarian intellectuals—ranging from well-known personalities such as György Lukács and Edward Teller to lesser-known figures such as the philosopher Aurel Kolnai—the book centers on five of the most profound Hungarian thinkers of the past century. The result of these choices is the exposition of the larger debate on the nature of society, morality, and belief systems appropriate for humanity in a time of crisis through the words, deeds, and introspective ruminations of a handful of men who created some of the most lasting works of postwar Europe. Congdon has written a book in which some of the most passionate thinkers undertake one of the most profound tasks of recent times.

The most riveting characters in the book are the brothers Polanyi and Arthur Koestler. The pages devoted to their intellectual struggles with the spiritual crisis of the twentieth century are the most gripping part of a book that does not by any means lack eloquence. Congdon dramatizes the multiple dimensions of the conflict between those who believed a planned society to be desirable and those who saw it as dangerous. In tracing the relationship between Karl and Michael Polanyi, Congdon uses their letters, conversations, photographs, as well as their masterpieces of historical sociology, to great effect in revealing the tragic incompatibility between these two worldviews. Likewise, Congdon traces the rise and fall of belief in Communism and its aftermath in the most sympathetic of the intellectuals portrayed here, Arthur
Koestler. At the beginning of Seeing Red, Koestler is a left-leaning journalist writing for the German press who in 1932, on a trip sponsored by the Soviet Union, finds himself sharing a room and debating the merits of Communism with Langston Hughes in Ashkhabad. At the end of the book Koestler is portrayed as a seeker without a mission, a man of the left whose inability to believe in any political reality has driven him to leave the external world of society for the inner world of metaphysical speculation.

The sacrifice of depth for breadth, or vice versa, is a tradeoff faced by many authors. Congdon stubbornly refuses to make this concession, weaving macrohistory, personal narrative, and intellectual responses to the challenge of Communism into a dissonant fabric. Although such an approach works chapter by chapter, it inevitably will leave some readers of the book dissatisfied. Some will be drawn to the history of Communism in Hungary and will find their narrative interrupted by ruminations on the tenets of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge or a minute exegesis of Kolnai’s orthodox Christian philosophy. Other readers, drawn to the marvelous personalities explored therein, will not readily allow a well-etched vignette of the Polanyi brothers and a richly and lovingly drawn portrait of Koestler to be followed by a chronicle of the mundane reality of émigré political squabbles. Congdon might have been better off writing two separate books, one on Hungarian émigré politics and the other on the metaphysical challenge posed by Communism to some of the century’s finest minds. This, however, is too much to ask. Seeing Red is a wonderful if ultimately frustrating combination of two fascinating stories, from which readers with a preference for one line of narrative will come away enriched by exposure to the other.


Reviewed by Ruud van Dijk, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Access to archives in formerly Communist countries has moved Cold War historiography forward in important ways, but “new” biographical studies thus far have been lagging behind other formats. One reason might be that one cannot immediately produce a serious, academic biography of a figure whose career spanned decades. Instead, this sort of project requires a long scholarly involvement with both the life and the times of the subject, as well as a thorough knowledge of the scholarship in relevant fields. It frequently takes the researcher to many different archives, often in more than one country. The results can be extremely valuable, as William Taubman has shown with his new biography of Nikita Khrushchev. However, Taubman’s book—more than twenty years in the making—also amply confirms that the most worthy biographical projects often are the culmination of many years of professional research and writing.