Attila Rácz

Prospographical Study of the Ruling Elite in Budapest, 1956-1989

Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Arts
Doctoral School of History

Dr. Gábor Erdödy DSc, Professor, Head of the Graduate School

Doctoral Program in Social and Economic History
Dr. György Kövér DSc, Professor, Head of the Graduate Program

Members of the committee and their scientific degree:
Dr. György Kövér DSc, professor and chairman of the committee
Dr. Zsuzsanna Varga CSc, associate professor (opponent)
Dr. Eszter Zsófia Tóth Ph.D. (opponent)
Dr. Zsolt K. Horváth Ph.D., assistant professor, secretary of the committee
Dr. Éva Standeisky DSc, retired university professor
Dr. Vera Bácskai DSc, professor emeritus, substitute
Dr. Márkusz Keller Ph.D., substitute

The supervisor and his scientific degree: Dr. Tibor Valuch DSc, professor

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Research topics and methods

My dissertation focuses on the recruitment, professionalization, mobility and retirement of the metropolitan ruling elite, in such a way that - on the basis of available sources containing valuable information - I have tried to highlight the private men behind the gears of the party machinery which these party leaders became.

To collect data for my dissertation, first, I had to determine who were included in the local (metropolitan) ruling elite. As such definition (local ruling elite) did not exist in the examined era, I created a contrived group which is referred to as the “ruling elite”. Following a thorough study of the related literature, as well as several consultations with my supervisor and other specialists on the subject, I decided to add to this group - on a political level - the First Secretaries and Secretaries of the Budapest Party Committee, the members of the Budapest Executive Committee, the First Secretaries of party committees on a district scale, and - on an administrative level - the Executive Committee Chairmen and Presidents of the Metropolitan Council and the police chiefs of Budapest. The selection is based on the cadre lists and the party and council archontology of Budapest. I deliberately excluded the leaders of the Communist Youth League Committee of Budapest, the leaders of trade unions and other mass organizations, and the commanders of the workers’ militia as well.

The range of the investigated persons is therefore not confined to the well-known historical persons (for example György Marosán, Károly Grósz, Károly Németh). I also examined individuals previously unknown to the general public and scientific research. Within my group, the link (a distinctive feature) that connects them is the fact that they are all part of the metropolitan ruling elite. The exhaustive data collection enumerates the same data for every member of the capital’s ruling elite. I investigated everyone from the same point of view, asking the same questions. Also, I examined the people on the same level in their own individual right, and also compared them to one another.

During my investigation, it was necessary to simultaneously conduct a basic research too, since there was no data or statistics concerning the capital’s ruling elite which could have been processed, from neither the examined era, nor after the political transition of ‘89. So, the new feature of my paper is that the Kádár-era’s ruling elite of the capital was neither localized nor investigated, and thus I did so by analyzing sources that have never before been researched so deeply and thoroughly. When compiling my dissertation, I wanted to highlight as much information as possible concerning the local elite while using my own prosographical methods.

Taking into account the parallel statuses as well, my prosopographical repository contains 294 positions. The quantitative data on the capital’s ruling elite used in my dissertation are derived from a database containing a total of 12,805 data cells, forty box per record. Although the paper basically deals with persons, they were usually sorted out based upon their position, since some of these individuals had to be listed several times as they successively assumed different positions, or filled them all at once. The conclusion of my dissertation proves this method to be correct, as the separation of Secretaries from members of the Executive Committee did not cause any substantial distortion. All possible outstanding alterations are acknowledged in my paper. Information is generally based on personal suggestions and their records in minutes generated between 1956 and 1989. The databases of my repository created along strict criteria were recorded in MS Access database programs (2007 and 2013), and then processed by queries in Access and also in MS Excel (2013) tables and charts.
Archival sources

To create a prosopographical database, and to analyze and complete the data, I studied both the Hungarian and international contemporary and post-1989 sources, Hungarian and international as well. These include literature in history, sociology, law, etc. Besides it was also important to screen and process the relevant archival sources. My research is mainly based on primary, departmental and corporate documents of the metropolitan and district councils and party organizations filed at the Budapest City Archives. I also relied on documents of the HSWP Central Committee, the Political Committee, the Organizing Committee, the Secretariat, the Party and Mass Organizations Department and the Trade Union and Political History Archive, all filed at the Hungarian National Archives.

To specify and complete the details of the database, I had to examine piece by piece the more than a hundred contemporary microfilms containing personal data at the HSWP Budapest Committee Party and Mass Organizations Department. Also, I had to sort out the election documents of the Budapest Committee of the Popular Front, and to digitize the minutes of the meetings of the Metropolitan Council and the Executive Committee. To complete the statistics obtained by prosopography and to back up the individual stories by personal information, it was very useful and also necessary to inspect the documents of the economic bodies under metropolitan and national scope accountable by the Central Control Commission. The missing biographical information of some who had been subjects to judicial proceedings were often obtained from prosecutors’ case files.

In most of the cases I had to run a real investigation, since no biographies were made readily available. The needed data often “emerged” from documents related to party school proposals, council elections, council meeting protocols or the elections controlled by the PPF.

To compare the examined peculiarities of the ruling elite with the characteristics of the Hungarian society and the capital’s population in the socialist era, I had to go through the contemporary and modern comparative studies and statistical series dealing with the changes in birth rate, people’s movement, standard of living, consumption and revenue.

Structure of the dissertation

I divided my paper into five major chapters. In the first chapter, I define my methods and describe the results of related researches concerning the Hungarian elite. In the second chapter, Elite recruitment, I show the place the political elite occupied in the capital’s bureaucracy, and also introduce you to the process of recruitment. When moving the cadres, the authorities often referred to the socialist morality in these days, so – as such synthesis does not exist – I also had to summarize the national and international literature on the socialist type of man.

In the chapter titled Access to the capital’s ruling elite, I analyzed the data (age, origin, occupation) of the recruits compared to the elite as a whole and also in specific positions at different times. I hereby also review the entry channels of the metropolitan political elite, as well as the horizontal and vertical mobility features, and give an insight into the process of admission beginning with the “cadre-development plans”, to continue with the way of conducting board meetings, and finally to show the induced personal tensions caused in specific locations by the functioning of the system. The last major chapter analyzes mostly in the same way the retiring members of the elite. This is a unique approach, because the researchers usually only examine the recruitment when studying the mobility of the party elite. Moreover, in addition to the farewell liturgy, I also analyze the circumstances of the unplanned cadre replacements, and the removals due to disciplinary reasons.
In the second half of the third chapter I question the terms of the recruitment process. I do this by concentrating on peculiar positions in different periods of the era in order to understand the role the state and party schools played in elite training. The fourth chapter is essentially focusing on the analysis of entry and exit of elite female leaders.

Annexes include archontology, index and almost two hundred figures to help with the understanding of the facts described in the dissertation.

Results of the research

While building the new party on the ruins of HDP, the actions of the HSWP leadership and the statistics suggest that the freshly formed HSWP was counting rather on new members than the former HDP members. On the contrary, my statistics related to the national ruling elite and the metropolitan party membership show that the HSWP was significantly counting on the HDP-apparatus, as 95% of the capital’s party workers had worked in the apparatus of the HDP.

In 1956/1957, instead of replacing the former HDP officers, new party members who moved in seeked membership after the “liberation”. In that respect, it would be worth to reconsider the oversimplification stating that in the seventies and eighties there was an ongoing fight for position between devoted communist militants and technocrats. This time, however, there is evidence that in 1956/1957 the new members of the party who became members of the post 1945 new regime wanted to get their share. In 1956, they were not in the majority. But before 1945 and in 1945 the number of new applicants had been outstanding, so they practically ruled out the other age groups until 1967. The next generation caught up with them in 1970, when again the local leadership of the party was reinforced by old party members. Thenceforth the “old party members” had basically no further supply for their local ruling elite, which of course does not mean that they entirely vanished, as in 1989, there was still four of them in the ruling elite counting 45 people. The generation embraced by the party after 1956 entered the metropolitan ruling elite for the first time in 1975, and from 1979 on, they took over from their predecessors the “right” to enter the elite.

The capital’s ruling elite included only eight people who were members of the illegal Communist Party before 1948. There were thirty-seven of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party, and fifty more of the Hungarian Communist Party founded in the fall of 1944.

About half of the elite were born in Budapest, while the other half came from the countryside. 99% had previously worked in Budapest. In fact 98% were still working in the capital when they became part of the ruling elite. At some point in their life, 80% worked for the apparatus of the capital or one of the metropolitan districts, and two third assumed a position under the jurisdiction of the Budapest Commission immediately before the recruitment.

Most of them assumed a second job in their lives when they began to work within the party’s apparatus. And after their sixth or seventh workplace, they joined the elite. The entry channels are extremely diverse; I devote a whole chapter to the analysis of the specific positions and mobility levels. It is impossible to elaborate on this here, but in summary, when joining the metropolitan ruling elite, 87% of them were upwardly mobile. Although, the most obvious channel of recruitment of First Secretaries, Secretaries and district-level First Secretaries were the party conventions held every two, four or five years, more than two thirds of them did not follow this path. The greatest elite renewal at a party convention took
place in 1970, when eight out of the eleven freshly joined became members of the Executive Committee.

The reassignments were executed according to the cadre-development plans, and in the majority of cases neither the individual nor the local employing organization were consulted. The future of the working elite was decided by a superior body. This created a lot of tension in several cases – which I also describe in my dissertation –, but the representative of the superior body smoothed them out by persuasion or pressure. 87% of the evaluated protocols testify that the operation of the “democratic centralism” and the execution of the decisions of the nomenclature’s higher authorities were provided by the presence of their representatives.

The average age of the metropolitan ruling elite’s members when joining the party was 21 years. Following that, it usually took them 20 years to forge their ways into the ranks of the ruling elite of Budapest. Taken into account the entire era, the average age of people allowed into elite positions was 42 years; even in 1989 it was 42.5. This corresponds to the country-wide statistics too, as the average age of the national cadre bureaucracy was 44 years in 1983, while the average age of the party apparatus’ personnel was 43.

The party was always into rejuvenation when it came to the Executive Committee, but the young members were usually paired up with older cadres. The effort to keep experienced party workers by the side of younger ones is noticeable. The issue of rejuvenation is not the product of the eighties, and a myriad of sources prove that the leaders counted on the experience of older colleagues.

Between 1956 and 1964, the generation in their thirties represented the highest percentage in the party nationwide, followed by those in their forties and fifties. In the eighties, the age groups between 30-39, 40-49 and 50-59 leveled. Party members younger then 31 years of age were always in minority within the capital, similarly to those in retirement age in the 1960’s. It was more and more difficult for the party to enlist the younger generation, but we also have to take into consideration that this age group was already below 15% in 1963.

By the end of the era, the membership of the party and the ruling elite showed signs of aging, also the proportion of people over 59 years has increased nationwide. So the aging factor of the top party elite was not a unique characteristic, but can be associated with the aging of the society as a whole.

Party members were in 78% of working-class origin and 15% of peasant origin, which was well above the ratios of the nation-wide party apparatus. The percentage of people of working-class origin was highest among Council Presidents (100%), and Secretaries (93%). It was the lowest among First Secretaries (55%). The rate of people of peasant origin was strikingly higher among First Secretaries (36%) and police chiefs (33%) than among district Secretaries (16%), Executive Committee members (11%) or Secretaries (7%). However, the surveys conducted on a national level in 1949 and from 1962 to 1964 and also in 1973 show that the leading intellectual (senior) staff positions were filled by people in over 30% of intellectual origin.

The rate of mobility and intellectuals among the capital’s ruling elite increased steadily. The downward mobility of the intelligentsia in the years 1956 and 1957 was 50%, but the ratio between intellectuals and those of intellectual origins in 1983 was an astounding 100% (no mobility).

Persons of peasant origin in the capital’s ruling elite have always been through generations, upwardly mobile. Between 1960-1974 and 1978-1979 there were no intellectuals among the ruling elite which consisted of more than 40 people, so the seven persons of intellectual origin
emerged outside these intervals. However, 96% of the intellectuals joining the ruling elite were, surprisingly, first generation intellectuals.

According to their first profession (original occupation), 70% of the metropolitan ruling elite were workers and 30% were intellectuals. An overview of the positions shows that the metropolitan First Secretaries had the highest percentage of sometime workers: there were 5 times more workers than intellectuals. The numbers were the same in the case of district-level party Secretaries, but there was a significant difference when it came to police chiefs and presidents of the local councils.

The nationwide collected data showed that between 1945 and 1982 the most common type of recruits was the one of worker and peasant origin. These people were not only born to peasant and worker parents, but also started out as workers or peasants. The proportion of those in senior position who began their career as intellectuals was only slowly increasing. One-fifth of the intellectuals followed the “implicit” intellectual way of life. But at the end of the era, it became very rare that someone of worker or peasant origin did not start out as an intellectual and made its way to the intelligentsia during their careers.

In terms of their origin, the proportion of workers decreased from 88% to 75% in 1970. The shift in the ratio of workers vs intellectuals as original profession is similar, almost insignificant, dropping from 89-11% to 86-14%. However, if we consider the type of occupation the recruits had at the moment of joining, we find that the proportion of workers decreased and the proportion of engineers was doubled, but almost two thirds of the elite are still the workers.

In 1989, in terms of their original occupation, roughly half of the retiring party officials were intellectuals and the other half were workers (55% and 45%). Only 9 out of the 23 replacements were workers (41%) and 13 intellectuals (59%). Considering their original occupation, two-thirds of those who remained in their position until 6 October 1989 (the end of the Communist era) were intellectuals and one-third was workers. 63% of all who left in 1989 were intellectuals.

So the high ratio of intellectuals (66%) in October 1989 is not due to the new arrivals of 1989, nor is a result of the retirement of leaders who originally had worker background. The explanation lies in the fact that 16 (70%) out of the 23 newcomers who joined the elite before '89 and remained in their position until the change of regime were intellectuals regarded their original occupation. This indirectly implies that the intellectual predominance (two-thirds of the ruling elite) persisting at the time of the change of regime dates way back and was only maintained by the freshly joined in 1989.

In terms of the actual occupation of people joining the elite has been 45% intellectual. Most of them were teachers, engineers, and economists, but there were also some lawyers and artists. Comparing the first profession acquired to the joining-time occupation, the ratio of workers vs intellectuals had reversed everywhere except for the metropolitan First Secretaries (in which case it stagnates at 83% -17%). The proportion of workers in the group of district First Secretaries was still above the average, but its rate dropped from 74% to 60%. In other fields, it is even more spectacular. In the case of the HSWP Budapest Executive Committee members the proportion of college and university graduates jumped from 36% to 51%. The same trend can be observed when it comes to Secretaries (from 44% to 59%), council presidents (43% to 71%) and police chiefs (from 33% to 75%).

The number of workers joining the metropolitan ruling elite was at its peak in 1956 and 1957. This was followed by a few more salient years: 12 in 1962 and 13 in 1970. As if they wanted to compensate the proportion of workers around the time of party congresses. Such a
great leap was unprecedented for the intellectuals until the 1980s – except for the year 1970, when they gained eight positions. Anyway, the intellectuals overtook the workers in 1975, and from 1976 onward they were always on the lead. In the eighties, the workers had only one upheaval, in 1989, but at that time, the number of intellectuals in the ranks of the elite was also doubled.

Statistics of party members on a metropolitan and national scale show the same: the proportion of workers slowly declined, and in the summer of 1966 the number of intellectuals surpassed that of the workers in Budapest. By 1970 this applied to the whole country.

When in the seventies, the statisticians of the party measured the expansion of intellectuals, they added the retired people to the number of workers, and when the statistics did not turn out as the central will would have expected, they simply modified the statistical metrics or the admission quotas.

Regarding their original profession, one fifth of the workers had an intellectual job before they joined the ruling elite of the capital. They represent 30% of the intellectual newcomers. This means that at least one-third of the new intelligentsia joining the elite must have had some sort of personal worker consciousness. In other words, two-thirds of them have never been workers! However, among the leaders of the Budapest Commission there was not one who would have turned intellectual before joining the elite.

In contrast to the specialized literature, it was not the number of technocrats or professional intellectuals that increased in the ranks of the metropolitan elite, but in general the proportion of the intelligentsia.

When comparing the mobility between generations in Hungary, we can make two observations. The first is that the mobility measured among the ranks of the metropolitan ruling elite is following the path of the national trend, and that its proportion is similar too. However, the reasons behind these results are different. It is well known that in the rapidly industrializing socialist Hungary the peasant masses were snatched up by the industry, which increased nationwide the ratio of total mobility, but the changes in the mobility of the ruling elite in the capital were not entirely due to these same reasons. Only 16% of the latter's members were of peasant origin. Whichever period of time we examined, the result was that workers have generally been laborers, and that intellectuals have mostly been laborers previously, rather than peasants.

The mobility within generations brought interesting results as well. Between 1956 and 1957 the rate of mobility among the freshly joined was only 7%, and among the entire elite 8%. In 1970, the rate of mobility was 24% for the newcomers, and 23% in the case of the total elite. In 1980 and 1985, 26% and 17% of the ruling elite was mobile. This stems from the fact that those who started out as laborers, usually stayed workers even after they joined the elite. Due to their smaller proportion, the intellectuals could not keep up with them. After 1980, we can say that those who joined the elite as intellectuals, had generally an intellectual job from the beginning. This means that the members of the elite were truly mobile only until their first job.

The prosopographical study of the metropolitan ruling elite made it clear that the professionalization of the party elite in the Kádár era cannot be exclusively explained by the increasing number of diplomas acquired in state education. Although the number of graduates undoubtedly increased around the time of the change of regime, the positions for professional men were filled with lower-skilled persons – if the situation required so. The “expert” party members were not to progress primarily because they had a degree, but if they were loyal to
the system. To demonstrate their expertise, they had to keep their work in line with party decisions and the knowledge acquired in party schools.

30 out of the 294 positions of the ruling elite were filled by women, so it was obvious that I had to examine their indicators compared to the whole elite. Neither on a national nor on the metropolitan scale were the women represented in the ruling elite according to their social proportion. The Budapest Party Committee had no female First Secretary and only 3 out of 27 Secretaries were women. The Executive Committee had 8 female members out of 67, and there were only 19 women among the 177 district (level) First Secretaries. The City Council and 17 district-level Party Committees did not have a female leader in 33 years. However, women joining the elite had similar “indicators”: 96% of them were of working-class origin, and their inter-generational mobility was three times bigger compared to the whole of the elite, but their intra-generational mobility was 0% compared to the 42% of the men.

The rate of women’s college and university qualifications meet the educational level of the elite as a whole, but ninety percent of them graduated in party schools, and four-fifths of those acquired a higher education.

Most of them came from Budapest, they all had a job earlier in the capital, and 29 of them still worked in Budapest when they joined the elite. Five of them never worked in a position within the scope of the Budapest Party Committee – which means that third of the women were “outsiders”. However 80% came directly from the borderlines of the party or a mass organization. One of them was a former deputy minister. Before joining the elite, three of them were Corporate CEOs or directors, and one of them was Deputy Chairman of the Central Statistical Office. In average, women joined the metropolitan ruling elite when they occupied their seventh position.

In terms of vertical mobility 86% of the position shift meant stepping up in the ranks of the local elite, and only 9% represent horizontal displacement.

Although, according to the party propaganda, women were encouraged to catch up, and in theory their access to top positions was provided for, the statistical figures show signs of discrimination against women.

Members of the elite, on average, spent five years in their top positions. The members left behind their leading positions as follows: 18% in less than 1 year, 9% between 1-2 years, 12% between 2-3 years, 10% between 3-4 years, and 11% between 4-5 years. This means that in average 60% of the local elite had been replaced every five years. It’s a shocking fact that the First Secretaries and Secretaries of Budapest were replaced rather frequently. Károly Németh, the governor of the capital between 1965 and 1974 represented the stability and continuity in this era.

In general, the dismissals did not take place during party sessions. 97% of the members leaving the elite remained in Budapest and worked in the capital, but almost half of them drifted away from the power of metropolitan and district Party Committees. As for the channels of mobility we can say that – not taking into account death, retirement and the change of regime – those who resigned continued to work on the borderlines of the party (40%), or were transferred to bodies of ministries, the State Administration, and Councils (20%). Only 12% joined mass organizations, and even less, 10% were absorbed by the economy. A large majority, 70% of the First Secretaries left the classic tracks of the Party, and were reassigned to ministerial, administrative or mass organizational areas: one became the President of the Council of Ministers, another the Vice President of the Council of Ministers, again another the Secretary and Vice President of the Presidential Council, two were promoted Ministers, and one person turned Secretary-General of the National Council of
Trade Unions. Only three remained in the realms of the party: two became Secretaries of the Central Committee, and one Secretary of the Budapest Party Committee. 26% of the Secretaries stayed on the course of the party, 33% relocated themselves in Ministries, the State Administration and the Council. The most susceptible to leave the lines of the party were the members of the Executive Committee (45%), the district-level First Secretaries (42%) and Presidents of the Council (40%). Two of the Council Presidents got a new position in the Central Committee, and one became the leader of PPF. The one who remained in the field of the Council, the Deputy President of the Executive Committee turned Vice-President of the Council. In terms of their mobility, 65% of the quitters moved upward, 28% downward, and only 8% of them shifted position horizontally.

In the chapter dealing with farewell liturgy I also describe the 18 persons who had to leave because of some inappropriate behavior in the light of socialist morality. This section is more entertaining than the others, concentrating on theft, embezzlement, alcoholism, free love and violation of party discipline.


8. Rácz, A. 2009. Who killed Kennedy, or what does the mood reports reveal concerning the feelings of the population? In: Sic Itur ad Astra (Ki ölte meg Kennedyt, avagy a lakosság hangulatárából árulkodnak-e a hangulatjelentések? In: Sic Itur ad Astra), (22.) 60. 235–244.


