

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956

by Raechelle Vix

This paper was selected by the Department of History as the Outstanding Paper for the 1984-1985 academic year.

One Sentence on Tyranny

This is tyranny --
Whether in confession of prisoners
Or confession of lovers,
In the woods that should be soft, half-spoken
Tyranny is the fly in the wine-glass;
Not in the bride bed only,
But in the yearning, the wanting even,
And in the beauty and love even
Because tyranny has been there before you.
Love, your love, has been ravished.
Tyranny is there when you lie down together.
It is the darkness in your throat.
Tyranny is in your food, your drink,
Tyranny is in your mouth, your nose,
You smell it, taste it, warm or cold,
Indoors or out, by night or day.
Where there is tyranny
And all is vain --
Great art or this true litany.
And when your grave is dug,
When your body is lowered,
It states who you were,
It makes use of your ashes.

-- Gyula Illyes
Hungary, 1950

Man lives by revolution in two ways. He rotates around a central axis which is the life of the species, and periodically he makes fundamental changes in the organization of his social existence. Whether he knows it or not, his life, as well as the lives of his ancestors and of his progeny, responds to a stimulus which originates in the evolutionary process of which he is an increasingly dominant part. We do not know much about this process; we merely know about its workings. Much like electricity, which we can measure, use, develop and marvel at, but which we do not really understand, this process working in the human species has many measurable qualities; nevertheless, it is still a mystery, a part of the great unknown.

Whether history is interpreted according to Marxian materialism or in terms of national fairy tales, or in terms of Carl Jung's atavistic archetypes, the evolutionary pressure which periodically erupts in revolution is clearly visible throughout. That evolution should express itself in revolutions may be a farfetched notion. Yet, as a line is but a succession of points, evolution seems to be made up of myriad of revolutions, some spontaneous and some reflex responses to outside events. Though it may be difficult to see and to understand what an unarmed man walking up against a Soviet tank in Budapest has to do with something happening in another part of the world, the connection is still there.

In this paper, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 will be examined. A brief view of the historical facts of a nation in ferment will be presented. The revolution will be analyzed also as the story of a whole nation condemned to stand still under a stopped clock, a nation severely punished for fidgeting, even with the nerves of the people strained to the limit of endurance and the hearts of the people ablaze.

In the general picture of Eastern European developments, the Hungarian scene had some peculiar features. Hungary did not succeed in changing sides effectively during the War and at the close of hostilities was probably in the worst political position among the former Axis satellites. She did not enjoy much sympathy in the West and was positively disliked by the Russians.

The Communists pursued throughout Eastern Europe elimination of all actual or potential opposition. In Hungary simultaneously with the liquidation of the non-Communist parties, the Catholic and Protestant Churches were intimidated and saddled, extreme nationalization accomplished, foreign investments seized, and a large-scale purge carried out in the Communist party. <1>

In all phases of Hungarian politics, energetic Russian intervention helped the Hungarian Communist Party. If the Hungarian government was not responsive enough to suggestions, there quickly followed threats, ultimatums, and use of sheer force. <2> The methods by which the transformation of Hungary's political structure was manipulated has been described by leading Communists. Joseph Revai, one of the leading Communist theorists in Hungary, pointed out in an article:

We were a minority in parliament and in the government, but at the same time we represented the leading force. We had decisive control over the police forces. Our force, the force of our party and the working class, was multiplied by the fact that the Soviet Union and the Soviet army were always there to support us with their assistance. <3>

Moreover, the preamble to the constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic, which entered into force on August 20, 1949, did not conceal but rather emphasized the fact that the assistance of Soviet Russia had been the deciding factor in the postwar transformation of Hungary's political structure. <4>

When Stalin died, Matya Rakosi was the undisputed boss of Hungary. Not content with the position of Secretary General of the Hungarian Communist Party, he had also

assumed the office of Prime Minister in August 1952. Such accumulation of offices, however, could not endure long after Stalin's death. The new Soviet leadership proceeded to dilute authority at the top: control of the party leadership was separated from the apparatus of the administration.

In May 1953, Rakosi was summoned to appear in Moscow with his faithful henchmen Erno Gero and Mihaly Farkas plus two mavericks, Imre Nagy and Istvan Dobi. The Presidium gave Rakosi a scathing denunciation of his stewardship during the past years.

<5>

The Hungarian delegation returned to Budapest with precise instructions. The central committee was to meet and condemn Rakosi's policy of over-industrialization and forced collectivization. Rakosi was to abandon the premiership and hand it to Imre Nagy, whose mission was to placate the peasantry by stopping the collectivization drive and to emphasize production of consumer goods at the expense of heavy industry. Then there were to be other reforms, notably the relaxation of police terror. <6>

This was the beginning of "decompression" in Hungary. While Rakosi's regime had been, in some respects, the most Stalinist of all, the "thaw" under Nagy was the most sudden and most radical. To be sure, the Hungarian innovations were not unique; but it was only in Hungary that the announcement of the new course created the impression of a substantial change in the nature of the system itself.

In October 1954, Nagy's position seemed impregnable and Rakosi appeared to be on the way out. A few months later, however, Nagy was ousted; and Rakosi was back. The wind suddenly changed in Moscow. Malenkov was forced to resign in February 1955 and on March ninth the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party, following instructions from Moscow, condemned Nagy's reform policy as a "rightist deviation. " <7> On April 14, he was deposed as Premier and in November was expelled from the Party.

The main reason for Nagy's fall was that his key policy, the reconversion of industry, was anathema to the anti-Malenkov group which had gotten the upper hand in Moscow. The chief stumbling block was that new capital would have been needed, but Hungary had no money and Moscow refused to foot the bill. <8>

It would be a mistake to interpret Rakosi's comeback as a return to Stalinism. In fact he regained only the shadow rather than the substance of his erstwhile power. The old party continued to back him almost to the man, but the newly integrated functionaries and the intellectuals were his fierce enemies. These opponents adopted Nagy as their hero, the man who had attempted to humanize the regime but was brought low by Rakosi's intrigues.

The first symptoms of overt rebellion in the party appeared in the fall of 1955. Not only did a group of Communist writers denounce the regime's cultural policies but the party

concluded that the new party line, as formulated by Krushchev, authorized them to denounce the boss openly and in public.

Realizing that Rakosi had outlived his usefulness, Moscow let him go and replaced him with Erno Gero. This did not appease the critics. Nor was Nagy's readmission to the party on October 13th sufficient to stem the rising tide of revolt.

The revolution lasted from October 23 to November 4. Short in duration, the days of the revolt can be examined in detail. The dynamic essence of the Revolution can be divided and analyzed into four distinct phases.

In the first phase, from October 23 to October 24, the revolt had the character of a disorganized outbreak. Fighting was sporadic and the government, though now headed by Nagy, treated it as a temporary disturbance. In this period, apart from the Petoefi Club and the Writer's Union, few demands were put forward. These dealt with limited reform of the existing system.

In the second phase, which extended from October 25 to October 29, the Revolution gained strength. The armed forces deserted to the people and the government of Mr. Nagy was forced into a series of concessions. The revolutionaries seized radio stations in Gyor, Pecs, Szombathely, and elsewhere, and voiced the demands of the nation. It was in this period that the people burst the bounds of the existing system, and, in the words of a Polish Communist who observed these events, pressed for "a curious synthesis: a basic realization of people's democracy (land in the hands of the peasant, socialization of factories and banks) and of a pluralism of parties, freedom of the press, and all the other liberties inherent in a liberal democracy." <9> Similarly, as clashes between Hungarian revolutionaries and Soviet troops grew more bitter, a parallel theme developed. This was expressed in the following demands:

... immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Hungary, the abolition of the Warsaw Pact, and a declaration of Hungary's neutrality between East and West. <10>

In the third phase, October 31 through November 4, the period of Hungary's brief freedom, the nature of the demands changed. The Social Democrats, the Smallholders, and the "Petoefi Peasants" resumed political activity as free parties and the form of the demands fell more or less into disuse. The government was gradually broadened and Nagy in effect joined the Revolution.

In the brief period of political activity allowed the nation, the demands for neutralization of Hungary came to the fore. Nagy formally declared neutrality on November 1, in an address broadcast over Radio Budapest:

The Hungarian people desire the consolidations and further development of the achievement of their national Revolution without joining power blocs. We appeal to our neighbors, and to countries far and near, to respect the unilateral decision of our people for a free, independent, democratic, and neutral Hungary. <11>

However moderate the official position might have been, the Soviet Union saw in such a program a threat to its interests. On November 4 it returned to the attack, and the final phase of the Revolution began. The Free Radios resumed their activity, but, as they fell to the Soviet armies, were silenced. In this period, the broadcasts dealt chiefly with appeals to the UN, proclamations of strikes and resistance, and military movement.

The last rebel broadcast in Hungary was heard on November 11, over Radio Free Rajk. It was no longer a demand on the Hungarian government, but an appeal to International Law:

We request the free nations of the world to assert what moral influence they can. If UN observers were sent to Hungary, it would be disagreeable, not only to Janos Kadar, but to his Soviet masters. <12>

The end of radio broadcasts did not spell the end of resistance. For a month Hungary was paralyzed by a general strike. In this period, the position of the revolutionaries grew steadily weaker, and their demands, so far as they are known, more modest. Until the end, however, the demand for free elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops remained fixed. With the final suppression of the Revolution, and the reorganization of the secret police in December, the cycle of political activity which had begun with the Petoefi debates in the spring of 1956 came to its end.

From October 23, the first day of the rebellion, the Hungarian nation issued demands in astonishing volume, and in the form of resolutions, manifestations, handbills, and brief tracts. Later, as radio stations were seized by the revolutionaries, political demands were broadcast almost by the hour. "It was as if a nation, long silenced, were indulging itself in the sheer functional pleasure of speech." <13>

The radio broadcasts provide the best single source on the ideology of the Revolution, for each station broadcast the demands of (the significant groups within its locale. This is not to say that every ideological current in Hungary is recorded in the broadcasts, for, undoubtedly, there were isolated groups, on the periphery of the Revolution who rejected the general tenor of the demands.

It is not this burgeoning of demands everywhere that is surprising for demands as such are a standard feature of revolutions. As G. S. Pettee, a student of revolutions, observes:

The attacks on the dominant classes are one of the most characteristic symptoms of a coming revolution, and naturally continue in ever increasing volume during the course of the Revolution. <14>

What is impressive in the Hungarian demands is their virtual unanimity. The demands were as much a statement of the fundamental ultimata on a disintegrating regime.

Between October 23 and November 9 a total of 225 major demands were broadcast by the revolutionary stations and monitored abroad. By category, these demands were: <15>

Demand	Number of Instances	Percent of Total
National Independence	78	35
Political Reform	69	31
Economic Reform	63	28
End of Censorship	8	3
Religious Freedom	7	3
Total	225	

Despite the emphasis on the political and social, the overwhelming majority of the demands were specific and practical. Apart from drawing the conclusion that national sovereignty was the basic demand, no generalizations are possible.

The massive Soviet military intervention launched in the early hours of November 4, 1956 was not a hastily improvised operation. For weeks the Soviet Union had been preparing Operation Expeditionary Forces of volunteers for intervention in the Suez Crisis should it decide on such action. This special army was conveniently at hand to send on Hungary. <16>

The Budapest events of October 23 convinced the Kremlin that military intervention was the only action which would maintain Soviet domination in Hungary. However, the Kremlin began to bargain with the government in Hungary. It is now clear that this was simply a ruse to gain precious time. From October 29 on, troops supported by tank units were moving into Hungary. By the evening of November 3, Budapest had been cut off by the Soviet forces. The Soviet High Command planned to subdue Budapest first, since it was the Revolution's nerve center. Budapest sustained tremendous damage, the like not having been seen since the end of World War II.

The student of history might wonder why there was no massive retaliation or support from the rest of the world for the Hungarian Revolution. The events can be analyzed especially in the United Nations, again because of the brevity of the Revolution itself.

The UN was in heated debate over the Suez Crisis at the same time the revolution was occurring. By the time a resolution was passed condemning Russia and calling for the withdrawal of troops, it was far too late. The deed had been done. <17>

By December 13, 1956, the government in Hungary under Kadar had suppressed the final appeals for change, dissolved the Central Workers Council and made massive arrests of the leaders of the Revolution. The "uprising" had been crushed. <18>

The Hungarian Revolution was a call by the Nation for control over its own destiny. It can be viewed both as a defeat and a victory of sorts. The Soviet tanks defeated the call for an independent Hungary. At the same time, though, the Revolution served as the stimulus for mutation in the evolution of a Nation.

Notes

1 Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, p. 147.

2 Ibid., pp. 162-63.

3 Imre Kovacs, ed., *Facts about Hungary* (Hungarian Committee, 1959), p. 33.

4 Paul Zinner, *Revolution in Hungary*, pp. 69-70.

5 Ibid., p. 101.

6 Ibid., p. 109.

7 Tamas Aczel, *Ten Years After*, p. 97.

8 Ibid., p. 102.

9 Kovacs, p. 75.

10 Lomax, p. 189.

11 Free Europe Committee, *The Revolt in Hungary*, p. 29.

12 Ibid., p. 42.

13 Ibid., p. 69.

14 Ibid., p. 74.

15 Ibid., p. 128.

16 Leslie B. Bain, *The Reluctant Satellites*, p. 204.

17 Ibid., p. 280.

18 Ibid., p. 291.

[Return to 1984-5 Table of Contents](#)