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The 1956 Revolution: Why Hungary? The Events of October-November 1956

The Hungarian revolution and fight for freedom that took place in 1956 was one of the most important events of Hungarian history in the 20th century and had a great effect on world history. The 13 days between October 23 and November 4, 1956 turned the eye of the world towards this small European country with barely 10 million citizens. But what really happened during these 13 days in Hungary? What circumstances led to this event we call revolution or fight for freedom today?

As a result of the agreements of Teheran (1943) and Yalta (1945), after the end of World War II, Hungary ended up in the Soviet Union's sphere of interest, and as a defeated country it stayed under Soviet control until the peace treaty was signed in Paris on February 10, 1947.

During those two years the country had only limited sovereignty and tried to establish a civil democratic society. However, in autumn 1947 it became clear that the democratic multi-party system – that could have made later transformations possible – will only remain a dream. At the parliamentary elections held on 31 August 1947 the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunisták Pártja) and the Social Democrat Party (Szociáldemokrata Párt) grew significantly stronger. This was due to electoral fraud through which they gained definitive influence in a government that was still seemingly coalition at the time.

With Soviet help, during the following months the Hungarian Communist Party gradually took over power after subverting and intimidating the leaders of the other parties. The leaders of those parties were allowed to emigrate to the “Western World”. The sovietisation of the country had started and by 1949 a tyrannical regime resembling Stalin's was created.

But what did that mean? Between 1945 and 1949 practically all industrial plants, banks and trading companies were nationalized. Land-reform was started in 1945 and the maximum size of privately owned property was severely restricted. Later the landowners were forced to join producers' co-operatives that followed the structure of Soviet examples. The Secret Police had been controlled by the Hungarian Communist Party since its establishment in 1945 and had committed numerous illegalities. Show trials were started against everyone posing a “potential” threat to the communists' power. Church schools were nationalized and the leaders of the different churches had to face trials. In industry and in mining the production norms set were impossible to live up to. The living standard that had been steadily growing between 1945 and 1947 continuously fell in the following years. Private property as such nearly totally ceased to exist.

As a result of all this by the beginning of the 1950's the country had already fallen into economical, social and political chaos as never seen before. In 1951 and 1952 the living standard and the gross domestic product (GDP) was lower than in 1938!

The dissatisfaction evoked strong passions in the members of all classes in the country. In March 1953 a crucial event occurred that would have a huge impact on Hungarian political life: Joseph Stalin died. The regime felt that the actual situation had to be changed, and in response to Soviet “urging” the party tried to “rectify” the problems. In 1953 Prime Minister Mátyás Rákosi, leader of the communist party – which was called Hungarian Workers' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja) – was removed from his position, and Imre Nagy was given the opportunity to form a government. He was regarded as a reformer compared to his predecessor.

Imre Nagy's policies made it possible to leave the kolkhoz (TszCs), the production norms were

lowered in the industrial plants, wages were paid regularly and there was some kind of cultural “freedom”. Of course the situation in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death had a great affect in enabling these changes.

But by April 1955 the situation in the Soviet Union had changed again and was affecting Hungary as well. Imre Nagy was removed from his position, and followers of the “hard line” – led by Mátyás Rákosi, general secretary of the Hungarian Workers’ Party – came to power once again. Imre Nagy later lost all his positions in the party, and he even lost his party-membership. The hard-line communists were on top again.

But in February 1956 at the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the party secretary Nikita Krushchev denounced Joseph Stalin, this at a time when Stalin’s great supporter Rákosi was again in power in Budapest. The changes that had started in the Soviet Union strongly influenced Hungarian public opinion and the political possibilities.

The majority of people were thinking about the possibilities of reforming socialism. They did not even think about leaving or being able to leave the path Hungary had been forced to follow since 1945, but they hoped that a “more humane socialism” could exist.

The possibilities defined after 1945 and awaited by many people were not realized, and this caused disappointment in most social groups. The workers, the masses of farmers and the majority of intellectuals were equally disappointed and dissatisfied with what had happened during the 10 years since 1945.

At the beginning of 1956 – mostly due to the tensions and debates happening in Poland – more and more people became interested in politics. The main chance and opportunity to talk about politics was at the events organized and supported by the communist party’s youth organization (DISz).

The organization founded originally as the “Bessenyei Kör” and later renamed “Petőfi Kör” held debates that became a regular event with the purpose of discussing the main problems of Hungarian society. These debates made it possible for the so-called party opposition to talk about their views but others could join the discussions as well. The events organized in Budapest always had many participants who formulated their critical opinion about the existing regime. The debates held to discuss the problems of the press or historiography and other topics always identified the need for the system to be reformed.

The social changes demanded during those discussions were, however, (at that stage) thought of as possible and necessary, but were still within the boundaries of the existing social and political system.

For most people the return of the Imre Nagy “era” was the most important objective. They thought that in that case Hungary’s economical, political and social situation would improve significantly.

At the same time there were heated debates within the political leadership. The decisions were in the hands of the “Soviet comrades” once again - they decided to “relieve” Mátyás Rákosi from his duties and ensured the no less “moskovit” Ernő Gerő was elected. At the same time politicians who had been totally neglected and disapproved of earlier were chosen into the highest ranks within the party. One of them was János Kádár.

The last important impulse spurring on the changes in Hungary came with the events in Poland in the summer of 1956. There the demonstrations brought about a revolutionary attitude and a new party and leadership seized power, formed not of new people, but which included those who had

been at the receiving end of insults during the Stalinist years. These people were able to consolidate the Polish situation in a way that was acceptable to the Soviet Union and to the Polish people as well, who appreciated it as the fulfilment of some of their demands.

The events in Poland triggered important trends in Hungarian politics and society as well, and these made events like the “reburial” of the “Tiotist” László Rajk and his comrades, executed in 1949, possible. The reburial took place on the 6th of October in 1956 - it was on this day in 1849 that 12 generals and one colonel who participated in the Hungarian War of Independence in 1848/49 were executed in Arad at the same time as Count Lajos Batthyány, the prime minister of the first independent Hungarian government.

The victims of the so-called Rajk-trial held in 1949 became the symbols of the illegalities that had happened in Hungary after 1945. Although they were the victims of power struggles within the party – and had been important leaders of the party – at that time they were seen as the victims of an antidemocratic system.

Tens of thousands of people took part in the demonstration and this was an early sign that Hungary wanted changes.

As so often in history, the students took the first most important steps. On the 22nd of October in 1956 the students of the University of Szeged created their own independent organization and published their demands which reached the students in Budapest as well. The Budapest Technical University of Building Industry and Transportation (Budapesti Építőipari és Közlekedési Műszaki Egyetem) formed their own MEFESz (Association of Hungarian University and College Students' Organizations) organization. Students of other universities joined this organization too, and they formulated their demands grouped into 14 points:

- “1. Immediate convoking of the Hungarian Workers' Parties congress, a new leadership elected by the rank and file members of the party, creation of a new Central Leadership (Központi Vezetőség).
2. Reformation of the government under the leadership of comrade Imre Nagy.
3. Formation of Hungarian-Soviet and Hungarian-Yugoslavian friendships, where each member is equal and does not interfere with the other's internal policies.
4. Withdrawal of all Soviet units from Hungary in accordance with the Hungarian peace treaty of 1947.
5. General, fair, secret voting with more participating parties, election of new national assembly representatives.
6. Reorganization of the Hungarian economy by involving professionals, use of the Hungarian uranium ore in Hungary, making the Hungarian external trade treaties public and reviewing of Hungary's planned economy.
7. Establishment of production norms of every industrial worker based on realistic levels and introduction of workers' autonomy in the plants.
8. Revision of the compulsory delivery system to the State and support of farmers working private land.
9. Revision of all political and economical trials, amnesty for all innocently convicted political prisoners, rehabilitation of people disadvantaged.
10. Public trial in the case of Mihály Farkas and examining the role of Rákosi, as well as bringing home innocent Hungarian citizens wrongfully convicted and held in Russia.
11. Use of the old Kossuth coat of arms instead of the hammer and sickle coat of arms alien to the people. Declaration of March 15 and October 6 as national holidays. New uniforms for the armed forces.
12. Realization of complete freedom of press and opinion, on the radio and in the written media as well. Separate daily papers for the new MEFESz student organization. Making the old cadre

material public and discontinuing the collection of new data.

13. Immediate removal of Stalin's statue, a symbol of tyranny and despotism.

14. Declaration of total solidarity for each other."

After the decree of October 22 the students summarized their demands in 16 points based on the above. These were circulated as leaflets and the issues were explained in more detail. The withdrawal of all Soviet units headed the list. The expanded appeal declared total solidarity with the Polish people and announced a solidarity march for October 23 at which the laying of a wreath at General Bem's statue would symbolize Hungarian sympathy.

The Hungarian political leaders' paralysis and indecision made it possible for the students to express their solidarity with the Polish people through a march and demonstration in the streets of Budapest.

The march that started in the afternoon hours on October 23, 1956 soon became a demonstration. The protesters demanded new political leaders, economic and social reforms – but not a change of regime – according to the 14 and 16 declared points. Protests were not only underway in Budapest but also in other major Hungarian cities.

The more than 100,000 people declared their demands at various places in the capital, amongst them that Imre Nagy be the head of government.

Imre Nagy arrived from his home to parliament in the evening hours and talked to the people gathered on the square. Initially he addressed the crowd as "comrades", but the people jeered at him.

At the same time the Hungarian Radio aired the first secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party, Ernő Gerő's speech, and that was unacceptable to the demonstrators.

The masses gathered around the radio's building – many of whom thought that Gerő could be in the building – wanted to air the 16 points, but the leaders of the radio refused. The radio was protected by the units of the Secret Police (ÁVH), who attacked the ever growing crowd with tear gas and then fired warning shots. This put the masses into a rage. The unarmed crowd started to attack the radio's building, while in the meantime more and more of them fetched handguns and hand-to-hand combat developed.

In the meantime the Hungarian Workers' Party's Political Presidium was in session discussing what to do. They came to the conclusion that a counter-revolution was underway in the country and that the Hungarian police forces and armed forces were not going to be enough to prevent it, so Soviet help would need to be called for.

Opinion is divided as to what happened next. Some opinions state that the Soviet (military) leaders had already alerted the Soviet forces in Hungary before the "official request". Others say that the forces were only alerted after the a phone conversation between Gerő and Khrushchev has taken place.

Khrushchev – just to keep things formal – advised Gerő that the Hungarian government should officially request Soviet help. Gerő believed that the government could not formulate such a request because of the events, and this is why the request was sent – after the event – by Prime Minister András Hegedűs after the Soviet forces had already been set in motion.

But why and how could Soviet forces be stationed in Hungary?

Researchers of the Hungarian revolution and fight for freedom have until now not really taken this question into consideration. Most thought that this situation simply came about because of the Warsaw Treaty (May 14, 1955).

However, the question is more complicated than that. Let us take a look at the legal situation of keeping Soviet troops in Hungary after 1945.

On January 20, 1945 the Temporary National Government of Hungary signed a truce with the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States of America in Moscow. In this truce the country accepted having lost the war and made many commitments which meant that invading forces could remain stationed in Hungary on the terms of the peace treaty.

The peace treaty with Hungary was signed in Paris on February 10, 1947. The 22nd article of this treaty declared that “90 days after this treaty has come into force, all allied forces must be withdrawn from Hungary. However, the Soviet Union may still keep as many armed forces in Hungary as could be necessary to uphold the transport routes leading to the Soviet occupation zone in Austria.”

This situation remained in effect until the signing of the Austrian political treaty on May 15, 1955. This treaty declared that all occupying forces must withdraw from Austria within 90 days of the treaty coming in force, or by December 31, 1955 at the latest. The allied forces fulfilled these requirements by October 1955, thus the Soviet Union should no longer have kept troops in Hungary as allowed in the Hungarian peace treaty signed on February 10, 1947.

The question arises as to whether the Warsaw Treaty (May 14, 1955) really made it possible for the Soviet Union to keep forces in Hungary, as many researchers believed.

According to the text of the Warsaw Treaty, the Soviet Union had no right to do this! The bulletin made public in connection with the treaty only stated what had to be done in the future: “The joint armed forces will be stationed in the states signing the treaty according to future arrangements between the countries and the joint protection needs.” As far as we know today, no such agreement was signed between Hungary and the Soviet Union before May 27, 1957, six months later.

The Hungarian-Soviet talks after the defeat of the revolution and fight for freedom were held in Moscow between the 20th and 28th of March, 1957. This question was also discussed at these talks. In connection with this the Budapest paper *Népszabadság* wrote the following on March 29, 1957: “The two parties agreed that they will have future talks about deciding on the number and type of Soviet forces to be stationed in Hungary, and that they will sign an agreement about this.”

This agreement was signed on May 27, 1957, and was codified as the 54th decree of statute of 1957, coming into effect on September 15. This effectively means that between the 1st of January 1956 and the 15th of September 1957 the Soviet Union had no right to station troops in Hungary, nor to become involved in Hungarian internal affairs. We can say that the Soviet intervention violated international law.

The intervention of the Soviet forces – which was already set in motion on the 23rd of October 1956 – was “sanctioned” by a retrospective “request” made by the head of cabinet. But most forces did not come to Budapest from outside Hungary, but from garrisons inside the country, garrisons that the Soviet Union had no right to have on Hungarian territory.

The Soviet intervention significantly changed the flow of events. After the peaceful march-come-

demonstration on October 23, 1956 transformed into a national uprising, the power still remained in the hands of the Hungarian Workers' Party. The transformation of the government – appointing Imre Nagy as prime minister – did not mean that judgment of the events had changed significantly. The first arrangements of the Nagy government mentioned martial law and counter-revolution, and with the help of some “promises” the government tried to “send” people from the streets back to work or home and the students back to their colleges and universities. But this was not successful. The Soviet intervention gave rise to more and more revolutionary demands. The people who had originally just demanded reforms, started to formulate requests for social and political changes – such as multi-party democracy – ideas that did not yet fit the concept of the government led by Imre Nagy.

The uprising became a revolution on about October 28th when the Nagy government acknowledged that the nationwide revolt served the interests of the whole nation, and that the authorities could also identify with it. At the same time new promises were made including the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Budapest, the dissolution of the Secret Police (ÁVH) and the raising pensions and the minimum wage – these were completely in harmony with the demands.

What followed was the demand for a neutral and independent Hungary. The parties dissolved earlier were reformed and new ones founded as well. In the meantime the members of the Imre Nagy government reformed on October 27, 1956 included non-communist politicians. Politicians well-known during the 1945 to 1949 era, such as Béla Kovács, Zoltán Tildy and Ferenc Erdei became members of the so-called “government-cabinet” in the rank of Secretary of State.

The discussions about the withdrawal of the Soviet forces that were to be started, the withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, the announcement of the country's neutrality were all signs of revolutionary transformations, and were more than was originally demanded.

The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt) – not the only political force anymore, but one of many different parties – formed on November 1, 1956, agreed with the political requests, the need for change. The leader of the party was János Kádár, who at that time seemed to be a “comrade” of Imre Nagy in the true sense of the word.

The position of the United States' foreign policy on this question caused a significant change in the course of Hungarian events and in the possibilities for the country. The American foreign policy was interpreted by everybody to mean that the United States did not want to interfere with Hungarian events and did not consider it desirable to have a country next to the Soviet Union that may not be “entirely friendly” with it. The American position communicated to Moscow essentially gave the Soviet Union the green light to deal with the Hungarian situation as it wanted, which is precisely what Moscow did. After negotiations with Tito, Khrushchev and the presidium of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided on an armed attack.

Two members of the Imre Nagy government, János Kádár and Ferenc Münnich had already left for Moscow on the 2nd of November 1956, accepting the role of establishing a counter-government in opposition to the legal Hungarian government. It was decided that the counter-government would first ask the Soviets for help, then accept their help.

On the 4th of November the Soviets stationed in Hungary together with those transported there from Romania and the Soviet Union overran Hungary. This final stage of the 13 days represented a real fight for freedom, as the Hungarian revolutionaries fought against the forces of a foreign world-power.

However, the power and the options for the revolutionaries were very limited and the fighting held out on and off until about the 15th of November. The whole of the country was invaded by Soviet forces, and political power was delivered into the hands of the Revolutionary Worker Farmer Government formed by János Kádár on November 4, 1956. The people's strikes

and protests were unsuccessful. The party backed by the Soviet armed forces was in complete control of the situation by the spring of 1957.

The results? Hungary remained behind the Iron Curtain, a country of the communist block. Some 200,000 people fled the country to make a new life for themselves in the West. Damage to national properties ran to many billion Forints. The fighting within Hungary claimed thousands of lives and more than 300 were executed between 1957 and 1963 for playing an active role in the “counter-revolution” – as the Kádár regime called the events. The majority of the executed were workers, students and employees aged 20 to 35. There were very few older people or people belonging to the pre-1945 “elite” among them.

The goal of the Hungarian revolution and freedom fight of 1956 was not to re-establish a bygone era, but to create a democratic, new Hungary. We had, to wait more than thirty years for this to happen. One thing’s for sure: it was made possible by 1956!