"1956" and Post-communism

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953-1963. Edited by György Litván. English version edited and translated by János M. Bak and Lyman H. Legters. New York and London: Longman 1996.

The collapse of communism left a burden for historians. Not only did history writing have to find new perspectives and methods, it had to deal with recent memories. Often these current events belong to a "space of experience" rather than proper history.

In Hungary the most important "white spot" has been the interpretation of the uprising in 1956. As one of the largest conflicts in Cold War Europe, the Hungarian Uprising not only had immense implications but also played an important role during the change in the system. First, during the Kádár era, the events were viewed as a counter-revolution. However, in 1990 a new name officially emerged: the first law enacted by freely elected parliament canonised the events as a revolution and a fight for freedom.

The first book written by Hungarians in Hungary after the collapse of communism is now available and in English as well. Although it is a translation, it is an enlarged version of the school text published 5 years ago and containing considerable detail and current research results.

According to the cover the text is "the first complete and unbiased history of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in its full national and international contexts. All previous accounts have been limited by incomplete and unreliable evidence, especially in Hungary itself". Subsequent to this statement it is argued that following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Hungary's own 'velvet revolution' (a concept usually associated with Czechoslovakia) once inaccessible material is now available. Can a book dealing with history ever be complete or unbiased? Is this at all possible?

The first chapter is written by György Schöpflin, a professor of Hungarian origin at the London School of Economics. The chapter

examines Hungary after the Second World War and deals with the democratic experiment conducted between 1944-1948 when enthusiastic acceptance of limited independence seemed possible. In fact, the German occupation did not turn directly into Soviet totalitarianism as has often been argued.

However, after the takeover some details of the communists' aims became apparent according to Schöpflin. For example, in 1951 a target which raised industrial plan output by 204% and eventually by 380% was adopted! Hungarian leaders tried to transform an agricultural country into "a land of iron and steel" in a few years. At the same time almost half the middle and lower level party officials were excluded from the party, the total number of those purged eventually reaching around 350,000. In addition to this, deportations of "class enemies" also began, difficulties for the peasants, etc.

Researchers János M Bak, Csaba Békés, Gyula Kozák, György Litván and János M Rainer coauthor the rest of the book. According to them the "New Course" initiated by the Soviets after Stalin's death already went deeper in Hungary than in the neighbouring countries. However, this policy, led by Imre Nagy, did not last long because Stalin's "most apt pupil", Mátyás Rákosi, and his supporters were strong enough to supersede Nagy. First, in April 1955, Nagy had to give up his post as prime minister and at the end of the year he was even thrown out of the party. However, little by little Rákosi himself became a burden to the Soviet leaders, who were trying to inject some warmth into relations with Yugoslavia. In June, 1956, the tables were turned and Rákosi was the one forced to leave and go to the Soviet Union. Indeed, this departure was publicly ascribed to health problems! Rákosi's close ally, Ernö Gerö, replaced him.

Nagy also had supporters and the formation of the anti-Stalinist opposition, which rallied around him from 1955, is introduced. Writers' activity is regarded as significant already before the 20th congress of the CPSU as are the discussions of the Youth Organisation Petöfi Circle several months later. All these are seen as a path leading to a revolution – not as a more contingent metaphor jungle into which a path is cut afterwards.

Finally the uprising is seen through the theory of spontaneity, breaking out via a peaceful demonstration and show of solidarity

with Poland, where Gomulka had been elected against Soviet wishes. The rest shows the events in October from the mass student protest on 23rd October to the armed uprising. Events which followed the demonstration happened in the manner of a "thriller": Stalin's statue was pulled down, Soviet troops came in, Nagy became prime minister. The Government changed several times and finally the multiparty system was restored on 30th October. Imre Nagy's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact on 1st November is seen as a heroic last-ditch effort at rescuing the revolution. Later it is known that in the Kremlin the critical decision regarding the second intervention was taken already on the 31st of October, before Nagy's speech. However, it does not become evident whether the declaration worsened Nagy's position or how it did so.

One chapter is dedicated to world politics, in which for example the belief in Western help (held right up until today in Hungary) remained an illusion. In fact, the status quo born at Yalta was realized in Hungary in 1956, in other words eleven years later. The decision of the West to invade Suez on 29th October was made a week earlier, not in the shadow of Hungarian events as had been thought. However, the operation gave the Soviets a free hand to intervene on 4th November.

The number of deaths and punishments has been quite contradictory. It is now estimated that from the end of 1956 to 1959 at least 35,000 people were investigated by the police for political crimes, 22,000 received sentences, 13,000 were sent to the newly developed internment camps and some 350 people were executed. An analogy, common in Hungary, is made in the book to the years 1848-1849, their consequences and reprisals, which are "retained permanently in the national memory". Whether or not there is such a concept as national memory, "1956" could, however, be found in the Hungarian space of experience.

Already in the preface, the analogy between 1848 and 1956 is mentioned by the editor, György Litván. He quotes the first declaration enacted by the Parliament in 1990. According to the decision of the Parliament the memory of the 1956 Revolution and Fight for Freedom, mentioned already at the beginning, was codified by law as were the events of 1848-1849. At the same time, the outbreak of

the revolution, 23rd October, was declared a national holiday. A conclusion made by Litván, himself an active participant in "1956" and later a member of the opposition movement, was that the moral foundation of the new Hungarian Republic developed over a long period, starting with a revival of the memory of "1956". Litván argues that virtually all the opposition tendencies which emerged in the mid-1980s eventually found their intellectual roots in the tradition of the revolution.

According to a popular view the events were taboo during the Kádár regime. However, some material, not discussed here, was already published during the first three decades by the "winners". Kádárists considered that the second Soviet intervention saved the country from an open counter-revolution. During the historical post mortem there is the question of what would have happened if the Soviets had not intervened for the second time. In Hungary right wing tendencies were to be found and the present power positions were legitimized by only seeing the dangers, when emigrants and many western scholars, like Hannah Arendt, noticed the positive, but not wholly realised horizon of expectation: workers' councils, anticapitalism, democratic parties, etc.

Péter Kende, also a participant in the events, goes far in his afterword when he analyses, carefully even, the alternatives and possibilities: if the endgame had been played differently (letting the Hungarians go), a changed Soviet system could have joined the world powers as a much more viable partner. Even the Prague Spring could have been ten years earlier and the end of the Cold War and German reunification could have preceded Gorbachev by twenty or twenty-five years... However, according to Kende, the political development of post-1989 Hungary has fulfilled the anti-totalitarian programme of "1956" and led to western-type democratic organisations. If this is true, history seems to be universal, continuous and the "same" even if political development was different in the 1980s than three decades earlier.

However, if these beliefs are taken seriously, they would be important in gaining an understanding of the watershed of political experience, which encouraged people to political action. For example, the majority of *samizdat* material distributed during the 1980s dealt

with "1956" and even the first unofficial conference had to be organised illegally on the 30th anniversary. Thus, a linear and a cyclical concept of history, forgetting and remembering, became directly political ones (the ruling party, for example, published a thesis in 1959 that 1848 and 1956 could not be analogised). Memory, flowers and symbols for death became a part of political activity.

During the uprising itself there was no time to create far-reaching political programmes. The consensus was rather concerned, as researchers have written, with the fact that people did not want the present situation: the regime's watchful eye on daily life, the anxieties and boredom of daily existence and foreign troops in the country. The expectations, however, were already significantly different: a reformed socialist order, a "national-democratic" direction represented by the peasant parties, conservative groups centred around Cardinal Mindszenty and finally partly extreme right-wing anti-communism. Thus the plurality of aims, in addition to the international impact, was one of the reasons why "1956" has become so interesting in European intellectual history.

I would like to argue that in 1989 history did not repeat itself. Rather, an attempt was made to reenact the best parts of political experience and memory. It seems clear that different actors had learnt the lessons of "1956". Second, many of the demands made in 1956, like free elections, were not realized until 1989. In many ways the same phenomena emerged as in 1956: a multiparty system, a new republican coat of arms (in the end it remained only as an alternative to the present "crown" found in the Parliament), national days and a demand for the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The political activity of the opposition was "rewarded" and many participants hold important posts in post-communist Hungary: the president of the republic, several ministers, the mayor of Budapest and several members of Parliament. During the first years after 1989 "1956" had its value in political legitimation. During the change of the system a need for public continuation emerged; this was found in the past and first and foremost from "1956". However, after 1989 former "losers" dominated the discussion, part of them ruling the country and the rest in opposition.

The most important problems have dealt with the three central

questions: who started the revolution, who continued it and what were the aims. There are at least three different interpretations, which at the same time have been a part of the political narratives dealing with the new parties and their identities. The "leftist" or "liberal" interpretations lay stress on Imre Nagy and his followers and argue that the "revisionists" already criticized the party in the first phase. The supporters of the more "conservative" interpretation, strengthened after the collapse of communism, believe that in the long run the people wanted to get rid of every kind of socialism and that it was only a question of time. The third interpretation, a "populist" one, concentrates on the streets and on the young armed rebels, who had nothing to do with the parties.

The discussion described above was not dealt with in the book but was found on three levels. First, in the organisations a confrontation emerged between former communists and anticommunists. Second, on the political level, the question was how to deal with the past: should the former communists be punished or should "the past" be left to the historians. Three laws have dealt with the punishments which in the end were contrary to the constitution. The last decision was made by the Constitutional Court in autumn 1996. On the third level there are the researchers. For example, the Hungarian version of this book was criticized by some veterans who considered the book did not tally with their own experiences.

Recent discussion has been clearly political and at least four comments have to be made in order to understand it. At first, 1956 is still so close, only forty years from the present, which means few archives but many eyewitnesses, who control the historians and their results. Secondly, history writing itself has belonged to the change. When the present was on the move, the same could be said about the past and vice versa (history after 1945, for example, did not form part of higher school examinations in 1990-1993).

Also during the change new political subjects (like parties) emerged, each requiring a history, an identity. When the old parties and the new opposition groups emerged in 1988 (illegally until February 1989) they had to build their past. Many different movements had "1956" in their programme, often even old veterans were among the first founders of the parties. Thus, the past became a part of

these new identities, creating new perspectives and horizons of expectation, which have created and united political movements during the first years of the new republic. The third comment will be the impact of communism, an ideology, which already claimed to be based on a concept of history. In this sense the discussion is peculiar to the whole of former Eastern Europe. Fourth, national traditions and culture have to be taken into consideration. It could also be called mentality, if mentality consists of language (understood widely as a part of the whole cognitive process), history and culture. The minutes of discussions of the Central Committee in 1989 were published already in 1993.

In conclusion, it would have been interesting if the present context of history writing had been explained more closely to the international audience. Now that a narrative from the "glorious past" is available, events are often seen through metaphors of resistance and words like "unity" and "the whole nation" are common. These try to create an image of a united history, of good people or "we", even if these are difficult to prove. This book is not "unbiased" either but rather a part, moderate and the best one until now, of the discussion which has taken place in Hungary during the last few years. In this sense the preface and the afterword are the most interesting to anyone who already knows the story. Did "they" really lock *every* typewriter in the factories and offices before 23rd October? How was the decision explained? Actions like these help people to remember rather than forget.

However, in his afterword Péter Kende sums up the three most important impacts of Hungary 1956. First, until 1956 the almost unshakeable Soviet Empire was shaken. Second, Hungary exploded the political (and philosophical) fiction of proletarian socialism and a number of other dogmas of the European left. Hungary also became a model for coming revolutions and revolts. Flags with holes in the middle were later seen in East Germany, Romania and in the Soviet Union.

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