

Fifty years ago this month

# The Crushing of the Hungarian Revolution

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**At dawn on November 4, Russian tanks, which had withdrawn from Budapest after the first round of fighting, returned. Six thousand guns opened fire on the city, raining phosphorous shells on combatants and non-combatants alike. Knowing that the attack was coming, “reform Communist” Prime Minister Imre Nagy and his closest colleagues took refuge in the Yugoslav embassy. The assault took place a few hours after French, British and Israeli troops invaded Egypt, starting the Suez crisis. Together, the two events had a massive effect on the development of the left internationally.**

The crisis in Hungary was part of a generalised crisis in the eastern bloc. At the end of June 1956 there had been riots in the Polish town of Poznan against price rises and the repressive regime, initiating a movement which would lead, against the wishes of the Russians, to the installation of Poland’s “reform Communist” Prime Minister Gomulka.

The developments in eastern Europe followed turmoil in the Soviet Union itself. After the 1953 death of Stalin, his successors, first Malenkov then Khrushchev, sought to develop a new road forward, given the misleading name of “de-Stalinisation”. This meant the attempt to create a more collective leadership style amongst the bureaucratic tops, a lessening of the terror and GPU repression, the release of thousands of political prisoners; more freedom for the arts; and crucially the attempt to define a new economic way forward, involving less emphasis on heavy industry and more emphasis on consumer goods.

These events shook up the faithful Stalinist bosses in the “satellite” countries of eastern Europe.

By 1953, the situation in Hungary had reached breaking point. Successive wage and price reforms, and the priority to heavy industry, were crushing the workers. The repression by the hated AVO secret police, many of them recruited from wartime fascists, was among the most brutal in the eastern bloc. Although quickly hushed up, 24-hour and 48-hour strikes were beginning to break out.

Fearing the situation would explode, on June 28 Soviet leader Malenkov secretly summoned Premier Rakosi and other Hungarian leaders to Moscow. Rakosi was told he was no longer prime minister and would be replaced by Imre Nagy, who would implement a “New Course”. Rakosi, however, was allowed to keep the position of party first secretary.

On July 4, 1953, Nagy announced his New Course. The expansion of heavy industry would be slowed to give more priority to consumer goods. The forcible collectivisation of the peasantry and persecution of “kulaks” would be stopped. Compulsory purchase of government “peace bonds” would be ended. Bureaucratic excesses would be ended. Some small-scale private business would be allowed. And intellectual and artistic freedom would be extended.

To strengthen his hand against the Stalinist diehards around Rakosi, Imre Nagy (pronounced

'Nodge') formed a non-party mass organisation, the Popular Patriotic Front (PPF), with himself as president. But infighting continued inside the leading bodies of the Communist Party.

In the 18 months that the New Course was applied, it has been estimated, the real standard of living of industrial workers increased 12%. Food shortages disappeared, and the supply of consumer goods increased. Political prisoners were released, and freedom of expression extended. Forced collectivisation of the peasants stopped.

But the changes brought some dislocation, especially the closure of a number of large factories. When Nagy was put out of action by a mild heart attack in February 1955, and Soviet attention was diverted by the overthrow of Malenkov, the Rakosi faction struck, calling a special party central committee to remove Nagy from the premiership.

A whole indictment was drawn up against Nagy, including being responsible for grave economic "dislocation"; but his gravest crime was the creation of the PPF, allowing the development of political activity beyond the bounds of the Communist Party monopoly. Successively, Nagy was deprived of his position in the politburo, forced to give up his seat in parliament and finally expelled from the party. But he refused to organise his supporters, even after his expulsion, fearing that he would be accused of "factional activity".

In less than a year, however, the Stalinist leaders of eastern Europe were hit by another thunderbolt: Khrushchev's "secret speech" at the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress in Moscow, which fiercely attacked the Stalin regime, accusing Stalin of mass murder and a reign of terror. Once transcripts of the speech leaked out, the world "Communist movement" was in turmoil. It could not escape most Hungarians that the indictment against Stalin fitted their own Stalinist leader Rakosi — a close personal friend of Stalin — like a glove.

Despite Imre Nagy's caution, discontent seethed, especially amongst students and intellectuals. The Literary Gazette published articles demanding freedom for writers; the party journal Szabad Nep made disguised attacks on Rakosi; the Petofi Circle, a Communist youth discussion club, raised criticisms of the leadership and allowed Julia Rajk, wife of a Communist leader murdered by the regime, to make a much publicised plea for posthumous justice for her husband.

Most startling of all, the state-run Writers Association congress in June 1956 refused to accept the "recommended list" for its new executive and had a proper election instead. This greatly embarrassed Rakosi, then in Moscow.

Upon his return, Soviet leaders Mikoyan and Suslov, who had followed him to Budapest, walked into his office and demanded to discuss the situation. He presented them with a master plan to purge "right-wing deviationists". They responded by telling him that he was no longer prime minister of Hungary. Mikoyan told him that a long holiday in Crimean would do him good; and that one of his bureaucratic lieutenants, Erno Gero, was now prime minister.

But the removal of Rakosi failed to end the crisis. Gero's appointment hardly inspired the critics of the old regime, being rightly interpreted as the replacement of one Stalinist bureaucrat by another. Szabad Nep made the astoundingly rebellious suggestion that Nagy should be brought back. The ceremonial reburial of purge victim Leslo Rajk on October 4 was turned into an anti-government demonstration by students, 300 of whom marched to the monument to Count Batthany, executed by the Austrians in 1849. The march was an obvious attack on "foreign occupiers" — i.e. the Russian army.

The nation's attention was now gripped by events in Poland. On October 19, the Polish politburo,

plotting the return of “reform Communist” leader Gomulka, was stunned by the sudden arrival of a delegation of Soviet leaders — Khrushchev, Bulganin, Molotov and Kaganovich. They told the Poles that the appointment of Gomulka was off, as was their plan to oust the Soviet-appointed Polish defence minister, Marshal Rokossovsky. The Poles told the Russians to go home, which, astoundingly, they did, accepting that their authority had been flouted.

The Russian climb-down in Poland brought events in Hungary to fever pitch. If the Poles could — apparently — break free of Soviet tutelage, then why not Hungary? Mass meetings at the Budapest Polytechnic and the Writers’ Association on October 22 proposed a mass demonstration for the next day. In Hungary’s second town, Szeged, students announced the formation of a new, independent, student organisation. Student groups throughout the country formulated programs of demands, which typically included the call for “an independent socialist Hungary”, the return of Imre Nagy and a new economic policy and party leadership.

October 23 was the first day of the revolution. Tens of thousands, including a huge contingent from the Communist youth organisation DISZ, marched through Budapest. Peter Veres, president of the Writers Association, made the main speech, calling for “an independent national policy based on the principles of socialism” and the involvement of the workers in running the factories.

At 5pm the crowd marched to the parliament building. A few thousand made a detour to the city park, where they pulled down the huge statue of Stalin. In the early evening Gero made a radio speech denouncing the demonstrators in uncompromising terms.

Following this, a section of the demonstrators made their way to the radio station in Sandor Street to demand an end to biased coverage, and a delegation of 16 was admitted to present their demands. When the delegation failed to return, it was obvious they were being held prisoner, probably by AVO guards. The crew of a Hungarian army tank tried to force admittance to the radio station and were met by gunfire, killing dozens of people in the crowd.

As battles with the AVO developed across the city, workers at the armaments factory in the industrial suburb of Csepel raided their own stores and freely distributed weapons and ammunition to the crowds. By 1am, hundreds of thousands of people thronged the streets.

Gero now took two fateful decisions. First, he called on the Soviet army to intervene; second, he handed the premiership to Imre Nagy, while keeping the post of party first secretary for himself. He hoped that by giving Nagy the formal position of prime minister he would appease the insurgents, but events had gone too far.

Next morning, in Budapest the workers and, especially, youth were doing battle with Russian tanks.

Within two days the revolution was being spearheaded by the main centres of the Hungarian working class: Csepel, Jupest, Dunapentele and Miskolc. In the town of Gyor, near the Austrian border, an insurrectionary committee took over the running of the town and proclaimed its own “National Revolutionary Council”. In Miskolc, as a precursor of what was to follow more generally later in the revolution, the leading role was taken by the workers’ factory councils.

The demands being put forward by the movement were overwhelmingly for independence and democracy within a socialist framework. In general, such demands included specific references to the end of the political monopoly of the Communist Party and its satellites, and for free elections. Yet as news of the revolution spread worldwide, the Communist parties everywhere spread the lie that the uprising was “counter-revolutionary” and led by fascists and CIA agents.

Journalists on the spot knew this was untrue. Peter Fryer, correspondent of the British Communist

Party paper, the *Daily Worker*, later author of *Hungarian Tragedy*, sent back reports outlining the true nature of the revolt, which were all suppressed. Correspondents of other west European Communist journals had the same experience.

The fighting in this first phase lasted until the end of October. Militarily, the revolution was victorious. The youth of Budapest and other cities rapidly learned how to deal with tanks, using Molotov cocktails. The Hungarian army spontaneously joined the insurgents against the Soviet troops. Many Russian troops fraternised with the rebels, until the intervention of their officers.

In Budapest, the fighting revolved around two giant battles, the first at Szena Square, where young workers and students under the leadership of a 59-year-old former bus driver, Janos Szabo, held back Russian tanks using barricades and Molotov cocktails. The other symbolic battle was at the Killian barracks, where a veteran Communist tank officer, Pal (Paul) Maleter, led Hungarian army units against a Russian siege.

After one day of fighting, the Hungarian Stalinist leadership got another lightning visit from the Soviet leaders. Mikoyan and Russian party ideologist Mikhail Suslov denounced the actions of Gero as insane, especially calling in Russian troops. They were furious with the Soviet commander Thikonov for allowing his men to be dragged into the conflict. They removed Gero as party first secretary and replaced him with Janos Kadar, who had been a victim of Stalinist purges in the late 1940s.

There was now a joint leadership of Nagy and Kadar, who appealed for an end to the revolt and promised reforms once the fighting stopped. The fighting did start to die down around October 30, because the Russian tank attack had been defeated — and they withdrew from the main towns.

While the movement had largely been initiated by students and intellectuals, once a serious struggle developed, the mass of the working class rushed into the breach. While the demands of the movement were overwhelmingly posed in terms of national independence and democracy within a socialist system, some of the political parties repressed by the Stalinists reappeared. These included the Social Democratic Party, the National Peasant Party and the Smallholders Party. Tiny groups expressing extreme nationalist and semi-fascist views also emerged.

Given the character of the Stalinist regime, it would have been extraordinary if procapitalist forces and sentiments had not emerged in an insurrectionary situation. The emergence of these organisations was utilised as key evidence by the Stalinists internationally to “prove” the counter-revolutionary nature of the uprising. It did nothing of the sort. It only showed that, as Trotsky had predicted, in the event of political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy there would be a struggle between the forces of socialist democracy and the forces of reaction. In Hungary, there was no evidence that these reactionary forces represented the feelings of the insurgent masses.

As the Russian tanks withdrew, Nagy found himself the leader of the insurgent nation. Nagy, a “reform Communist”, had fought for his “New Course” within the framework of the Stalinist one-party system. He had never challenged that system as a whole. He was now faced with the choice of trying to take the movement forward, or to set his face against it.

After negotiations with the Soviet military high command, Nagy announced the formation of a new government, with Pal Maleter as defence minister. His next moves were fateful. On October 30 he announced the end of the one-party system. On November 2 he announced Hungarian withdrawal from the eastern bloc’s defence treaty, the Warsaw Pact, and appealed to the United Nations to defend “Hungarian neutrality”. Of course, once the Soviet tanks returned, none of the western powers lifted a finger to help the besieged Hungarians.

Much speculation has subsequently revolved around whether these moves were the cause of the second Soviet attack, or whether such an attack was inevitable anyway. Some have argued that these moves, coming within hours of the French-British-Israeli invasion of Egypt, frightened the Soviet leadership into believing they had to take decisive action against international imperialism. The truth is that whatever their reaction to the Suez events, the Soviet leaders were not going to accept a successful revolt by the workers of an east European country, for fear of its consequences throughout the region and in the USSR itself.

As Nagy made his fateful policy announcements, party first secretary Kadar announced the dissolution of the Communist Party (formally known as the Workers Party) and the creation of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, with himself, Nagy and internationally known theorist and literary critic Georg Lukacs on the preparatory committee.

Janos Kadar

The next day, however, November 2, Kadar mysteriously disappeared. On the same day, it became clear that a new vast force of Soviet tanks and artillery had crossed into Hungary and was beginning to surround towns and airports. On November 3 Nagy and his government colleagues took refuge in the Yugoslav embassy. As the Soviet attack began on November 4, Kadar reappeared and announced the formation of a new, Soviet-backed, "Revolutionary Workers and Peasants Government".

While resistance was bitter in central Budapest, some of the fiercest fighting was in the workers' districts. The workers' council of the steel city of Dunapentele led a desperate resistance around the steel plant for several days. "Red" Csepel held out until November 11.

As we have seen, the Hungarian movement was initiated by students and intellectuals, the workers only joining once the serious fighting began. In the first days after October 23, the primary concerns of the workers were military — the need to defeat the Russian tanks. Only after the second Russian attack on November 4 did the workers turn their attention on a wide scale to building their own political organisations, the workers' councils. In part this was a reaction to imminent military defeat; the workers reached for the strike weapon and the creation of workers' councils to coordinate a new phase of the struggle.

By November 12, workers' councils had been established in several districts of Budapest and at least a dozen other working-class towns. A central council of the workers' councils of Budapest met for the first time on November 14. By this time workers' resistance had reached near general strike proportions.

The Russian leadership and Kadar promised Yugoslavia and the United Nations that Nagy could have free passage to exile in Romania. However, within 300 metres of the Yugoslav embassy, his bus was stopped by the GPU, the Yugoslavs aboard beaten up and Nagy and his comrades abducted to the Soviet Union.

By mid-November the workers' councils had become the universally recognised voice of the Hungarian workers, negotiating directly with the Russian army and Kadar. At first Kadar and the Russians tried conciliation; but as the strikes continued and the councils became more powerful, it was decided to repress them. On November 21 Russian tanks prevented a national meeting of workers' councils. By mid-December the leading figures in the councils and strikes were being arrested and imprisoned. It was one of the tragedies of Hungary that the organisations of workers' power — the councils — emerged only after the revolution had begun to be militarily crushed.

The aftermath of the revolution was tragic. Tens of thousands of Hungarian refugees fled over the Austrian border. Up to 20,000 people, mainly youth, were deported to prison camps in Russia. After

more than a year of silence, in February 1958 it was simultaneously announced in Moscow and Budapest that Imre Nagy and Pal Maleter had been found guilty of counter-revolutionary crimes and hanged.

The effect on the Communist parties in the West was dramatic. Tens of thousands left in France and Italy. In Britain, 6000 walked out of the Communist Party of Great Britain, perhaps 25% of its membership. Leading party intellectuals like historians EP Thompson and Christopher Hill, were among the most prominent defectors. Some who stayed, like Eric Hobsbawm, voiced sharp criticism of the Soviet actions. A huge debate convulsed the British party about the nature of socialist democracy.

The twin impacts of Hungary and Suez gave huge impetus, in Britain and internationally, to a new kind left which would oppose both social democracy and Stalinism. The ideas of Leon Trotsky were an obvious place to look for a theoretical explanation of the nature of the totalitarian regimes in Russia and eastern Europe.

However, amidst the political ferment, some notable left figures took very bad positions. Trotsky's biographer, Isaac Deutscher, justified the Russian second attack, arguing that the revolution had taken an anticommunist direction [1]. For Deutscher the key question was the danger that Hungary could be lost to world imperialism.

Ironically, Trotsky in his writings on Poland, Finland and the Ukraine had warned against precisely such ideas — that the progress of world socialism could be measured in terms of the number of square miles occupied by non-capitalist states. In addition to pointing out that political revolution against Stalinism would always engender the danger of counter-revolution, he insisted that the key criterion in assessing political and military actions was their overall effect on the consciousness of the world proletariat.

The crushing of the Hungarian revolution, while "saving" Stalinism in the country for a period, in the long term — like the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 — helped to prepare the basis for its dissolution and collapse.

## NOTES

[1] For Deutscher on Hungary see *Russia, China and the West, 1953-1966*, edited by Fred Halliday, Penguin 1970

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## P.S.

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