

## DAYS OF TRAGEDY AND FARCE

by Mervyn Jones

On Tuesday, 30th October, 1956, after a week of street-fighting in Budapest between Hungarian insurgents and Soviet troops, Imre Nagy announced the formation of a multi-party government. Its Communist members—Nagy himself as Prime Minister, **Géza** Lozonczy, and **János Kádár**—represented a repudiation of the detested regime of the former Party boss, **Mátyás Rákosi**; **Kádár**, indeed, had been imprisoned and tortured under **Rákosi's** rule. The other Ministers were drawn from the Social-Democratic Party, the Smallholders' Party, and the National Peasant Party (just renamed the Petofi Party in honour of the democratic revolutionary hero of 1848). The people were promised that elections would be held, but the four parties envisaged a period of 'democratic collaboration'.

This was the culmination of a growing crisis, opening with the death of Stalin in March 1953 and the realisation by his successors that his **nominees**—such as **Rákosi**—had reduced their respective countries to a condition of instability. In Hungary, Moscow's policy was initially to find a new Communist leadership which would regain a degree of popularity. Accordingly, Nagy was made Prime Minister in July 1953 and did something to lighten the burdens loaded by **Rákosi** on to the working-class and the peasants. But **Rákosi** still had friends in Moscow, remained **Secretary-General** of the Party, worked to limit or nullify Nagy's policies, and eventually regained full power with the dismissal of Nagy in March 1955. In June 1956 **Rákosi** was removed as a political liability, but his replacement by the equally contaminated Erno Gero meant that the crisis was merely accentuated. In October there was an upheaval in Poland; the Russians appeared to be on the verge of crushing unrest by force, but at the last moment accepted the replacement of the Stalinist team by an apparently 'patriotic' Communist, Wladyslaw Gomulka, who promised democratisation and free elections. In the event, this promise was kept in a pretty dubious way; independent candidates did appear on the ballot, but heavy pressure was put on the voters to approve the official list and no non-Communist parties were legalised. Gomulka proved in time to be as bad as his predecessors and had to be jettisoned in the course of a still more violent upheaval in 1970. However, this was not to be foreseen in **October 1956**, and the Hungarians—inspired by the Polish example and the

Soviet concession, and having burned their boats after fighting began on the night of 23rd October—were in a mood to settle for nothing less than full political freedom. On 24th October Nagy returned as Prime Minister, while **Kádár** replaced **Gerö** as Party Secretary-General. The broadening of the government and the promise of elections followed logically.

Also on 30th October, the Soviet Government issued a statement making some remarkable admissions:

**There have come to light several difficulties, several unsolved problems, and several downright mistakes, including mistakes in the relations among socialist states. These violations and these mistakes have demeaned the principle of equal rights in socialist interstate relationships. . . The workers of Hungary have. . . justifiably raised the questions of the need for eliminating the serious inadequacies of the economic system, of the need for further improving the material well-being of the people, and of the need for furthering the battle against bureaucratic excesses in the state apparatus.**

Crucially, the statement recognised that the stationing of Soviet troops in Hungary was legitimate only with Hungarian consent; remarked that 'the continued presence of Soviet units in Hungary could be used as a pretext for further aggravating the situation'; announced that the troops were to be withdrawn from Budapest at once, and from the country by means of negotiations; and wound up by saying that 'the defence of socialist gains' was the task of the working people of Hungary.

While these events were greeted by rejoicing in Budapest, the situation on that Tuesday was still rather unstable. During the morning, insurgents attacked the Budapest Party headquarters, which had been occupied by men of the AVH, the hated security police. The building was stormed, and forty-five AVH men were lynched. It turned out later that these particular men were not torturers but young conscripts who had, by no choice of their own, been drafted into the AVH instead of the Army. Still worse, the Party secretary for the city, who was lynched too, was a man of recognised integrity, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and the French Resistance, and an opponent of **Rákosi**.

It was on 30th October, too, that the Political Bureau of the Soviet Communist Party held a hastily summoned meeting in Moscow. To all appearances, the policy of withdrawal and concession had been established. The statement quoted above had been issued; Radio Moscow had been allowed to say: 'Reports pouring in from all over Hungary show that the workers support the new Government and approve its programme'; and Marshal Zhukov, the Minister of Defence, had told journalists: 'In Hungary the situation has improved. A Government has been formed in which we have confidence.' It may have been at this meeting, nevertheless, **that** the decision was taken to crush the Nagy Government and subdue the Hungarian revolt. At all events, on the following day railway workers in

eastern Hungary began to inform Budapest that Soviet troops were not moving out of the country, but into it.

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On 30th October, 1956, Israeli forces advanced across the frontier with Egypt and reached the vital road junction of Nakhel, in the middle of the Sinai desert. It was revealed later that they were covered, and supplied by means of parachute drops, by French Air Force units, some based in Cyprus—then still under British rule—and some in Israel itself. Two French squadrons had arrived in Israel the day before.

In the afternoon, the British House of Commons heard a statement from the Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden. He said that the Israelis were 'not far from the banks of the Suez canal' and that unless hostilities were stopped 'free passage through the canal will be jeopardised'. Accordingly, both Israel and Egypt had been told to stop fighting within twelve hours. Egypt had been asked to agree to the occupation of three towns on the canal by British and French forces. Failing compliance with this ultimatum, the British and French troops would 'intervene in whatever strength may be necessary'.

The same afternoon, the Security Council of the United Nations met in emergency session. The British delegate said that he had not received Eden's statement, but the Soviet delegate read it from a news agency tape. The American delegate moved a resolution calling on Israel to withdraw and on all nations to 'refrain from the use of force or threat of force'. Supported by the USSR, the resolution was vetoed by Britain and France.

The next day, British planes began bombing Egyptian airfields.

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The double crisis was to last only one more week. At dawn on 4th November, Soviet troops attacked Budapest in overwhelming strength. Resistance here and there continued almost until the end of the month, but on the very first day the outcome was beyond doubt. Nagy took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy. On 22nd November he emerged to go home, having been given a promise of safety, but he was arrested by Soviet security men and taken to Rumania. In 1958 he was tried in secret and executed.

Nagy had not been surprised by the Russian attack, although most of the citizens of Budapest were. What had been presaged by the troop movements in the wrong direction was made certain when **Kádár**, supposedly a key member of the Nagy Government, did not return from a visit to the Soviet Embassy. In due course **Kádár** turned up as the head of a new Government which claimed to have invited the Russians to restore order.

Meanwhile, British and French troops were invading Egypt. Paratroops landed on 5th November, **seaborne** forces the following day. By this time, however, the operation was already doomed to failure, chiefly because the United States refused to tolerate it. Eden is said to have told Mollet, the French Prime Minister, on 16th October: 'The USA will show displeasure, but won't stop us.' He was completely wrong. Not only did the Americans organise effective UN action by using the General Assembly to nullify the Security Council veto; they also exerted financial pressure which threatened a disastrous run on the pound. On 6th November Britain and France had to agree to a cease-fire, effective at midnight. The commander of the invasion force, General Stockwell, remarked later: 'There are many who say: why didn't we take Cairo? It would have been bloody good fun and we would have enjoyed it.' But his troops were stopped by the gong even before they took Ismailia, their objective in the canal zone. In December the British and French troops were compelled to withdraw, and in March 1957 the Israelis had to give up the conquered territory of Sinai and **Gaza**.

It was difficult, at the time, to establish an intellectual and psychological scale for one's reactions to the double crisis. The Hungarian uprising—whether the Russians tolerated it or crushed it—was clearly an event of tremendous importance. The essence and meaning of the conflict seemed to dwarf the day-to-day happenings and to assume an air of Tolstoyan inevitability. For anyone aware of the historical processes that dominate this century, and particularly for a socialist, it illuminated all the political and moral questions that had presented themselves unavoidably since the death of Stalin, and whose resolution is still being pursued. It was in 1956 that Togliatti first declared that the Soviet Union must not be taken as the 'obligatory model' for socialism, opening a development that leads to **Berlinguer's** Moscow speech of 1976.

By contrast, the Suez adventure (many commentators were led almost automatically to speak of 'the Suez adventure' but of 'the Hungarian tragedy') had an air of pettiness and absurdity, reflected in the half-nauseating and half-pitiable levity of General Stockwell's words. Never, I think, has history so ironically worn the faces of tragedy and farce at the same time. Suez was a throwback to a vanished age of imperial posturing, a diversion from reality. It was the outcome of a string of silly miscalculations (about everything, even the real importance of the Suez canal when super-tankers were round the corner); it need never have happened, it was as near to being accidental as any actual event can be. One could scarcely help—I was working on Tribune at the time—adopting a **tone** of derisive satire when writing about Suez, while trying to rise to the dignity and gravity of the issue when one turned to Hungary. I well remember the Sunday afternoon of 4th November, when we demonstrated for a Suez cease-fire. While we were pressing toward Downing Street (resisted by the

police, whose routine hustling and shoving evoked yells of 'Fascists!' and 'Brutality!', in itself a sign of how far we were from the fatal realities) someone said to me: 'Do you know that the Russians have sent the tanks into Budapest?' I was filled with rage against Eden, not so much for what he had done as for forcing me to waste my time on him.

Now that I return to these disparate themes twenty years later, I still feel as though I were required to review productions of *King Lear* and *Rookery Nook*, and asked by the editor to introduce a link. There are indeed links, to which I shall return in considering the effects of the double crisis on the social and political atmosphere, particularly in Britain. But I want—not merely because I am writing for *The Socialist Register*, but chiefly **because** time has confirmed the balance of significance which we felt intuitively in 1956—to concentrate on the Hungarian tragedy. The tragedy is precisely that it had to happen; that so many people had to suffer and die in order to reveal the distortions that had been imposed on the socialist ideal.



The antecedents of the Hungarian crisis lie in the imposition of the Soviet system, more or less disguised under the label of 'people's democracy', on eight countries of central and eastern Europe (counting what was at first the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany) following the second world war. The realities which made this a difficult enterprise, in which any schematic timetable was bound to bring more problems than achievements, may be thus summarised:

1. These were economically backward countries in which modern industry either did not exist or had been badly damaged in the war. To create a solid industrial base was necessarily a long undertaking, bringing no rewards for years. To be done at all it required mutual co-operation, not the attempted development of eight self-sufficient economies, with no outside links except bilateral deals with the USSR. External aid was lacking; the deals with the USSR were indeed exploitative, designed to repair that country's war losses, rather than helpful. The rejection of American aid, available to the capitalist nations of western Europe, was bound to be a political handicap.
2. Above all these were peasant countries, and the peasants were hoping for a distribution of land to replace feudal estates by family farms. Considering the low level of equipment, and the number of able-bodied men from the peasant class killed in the war, the nurturing of family farms demanded the maximum both of encouragement by authority and confidence among the peasants. Moreover it was the peasants, denied virtually all human rights in the past, to whom 'liberation' had the most concrete meaning.

3. Politically these countries had lived under open or thinly veiled dictatorships, now discredited thanks to their alliance with Hitler. Habits of popular initiative could be developed only by degrees. Yet there was a considerable demand for a free political life, understood in simple terms of diversity of opinion. There were more people wanting this kind of freedom than ready for socialist objectives. Thus, for a Communist Party to champion such yearnings could only yield political advantages, while to crush other trends of thought and enforce a monopoly of power could attract only distrust. Wisdom suggested isolating fascists and reactionaries, not isolating the Communists from social-democrats or liberals. Imre Nagy had learned this by 1956, but by 1974 it had still not penetrated to Alvaro Cunhal in Portugal.
4. The Communist Parties themselves were small and attenuated by persecution, as well as by losses in the resistance to Hitler. Years of imprisonment or exile had isolated the leaders from popular experience, so that they stood in need of learning as well as teaching. They were by no means automatically accepted as the future guardians. It was simply not possible to run the country on the principle that only a Communist could be trusted. Yet this was done; it was as though, by virtue of having once been secretary of the Chalk Farm branch of the CP, a comrade should be appointed to control the ICI chemical complex, or the port of Liverpool, or Charing Cross hospital. Some comrades were devoted and capable, but of course some were unequal to their tasks and some were corrupted by power and privilege. When things went wrong, they falsified the production figures for fear of punishment, while demanding harder work from the workers in place of effective planning. Meanwhile, even the thin ranks of the Communists were depleted by arrests and purges of the supposedly unreliable, and only the totally subservient—who in many cases had never become Communists through conviction at all—were trusted. Before long, Communists became simply the new masters, hated and despised by the people.
5. Each of these countries cherished its national independence with a sensitivity that had been sharpened by subjection to German overlords. However, the war-weary peoples (especially the peasants) did not necessarily hail the Russian armies as liberators, but sometimes saw them as another invading horde, bringing destruction and prone to looting and raping (of which there was a good deal). Moreover, patriotic and democratic traditions were to a great extent anti-Russian because the Czarist power had appeared as an oppressor. If 'friendship with the Soviet Union' were to be made a reality, it could only be through tactful handling and genuine equality. Instead of this, as soon as Communist governments took control it was apparent that the real authority rested with the Soviet ambassador and the commander of the

Soviet troops. Adulation of all things Russian—Russian, not specifically Soviet—became compulsory; Russian models were enforced in every sphere of economic, cultural and educational life; criticism of the USSR became the worst of crimes. The worship of Stalin intensified the evil, for in Russia he was at least a national ruler and a successful war leader, while in other countries he was simply an alien potentate.

This general picture requires substantial modifications, simply because we are speaking of eight different countries. Czechoslovakia possessed a substantial amount of modern industry, which moreover was largely undamaged in the war. Czechoslovakia, too, had been a political democracy between 1918 and 1939; a large Communist Party enjoyed so much support that it won 38% of the votes in contested post-war elections. In Yugoslavia, patriotic feelings strengthened the hand of the Communist leaders of the partisan armies; this made Yugoslavia the staunchest champion of the whole bloc until 1948, though it naturally had the reverse effect after the break between Tito and Stalin. In Bulgaria, the ancient enemies were the Turks and the national traditions were pro-Russian. The two countries that conform most accurately to my overall sketch are Poland and Hungary, so it is by no means accidental that the threads snapped in just these countries in 1956.

What the upheavals of that year did was to confront deception with reality. Several Western Communists, who had been to Poland or Hungary as honoured guests to attend peace conferences or youth festivals, or as members of carefully shepherded delegations, went again when the facade had crumbled and found themselves in an utterly different landscape. The fact is that, as well as the mere ruthless enforcement of the Soviet model, there had been an element of visionary utopianism in the way eastern Europe was managed in the heyday of 'people's democracy'. Huge new industries—for instance, a steel industry in Hungary which had never had one before—were created and at once proclaimed to be a triumphant success.<sup>2</sup> Peasants, having been given land with the break-up of the feudal estates, saw it taken away after a couple of harvests and grouped into collective farms; these were supposed to be an instant success too, though in reality livestock were slaughtered and crop yields declined just as in the USSR in 1929-31. The 'transformers of society' pressed on in a kind of death-or-glory spirit, as though the splendour of the ambition were a talisman promising at least some results. The controlled press and controlled litterateurs fostered the illusion, sometimes cynically and sometimes in the grip of auto-intoxication. A poet said to me in Bratislava in 1953 (after several drinks): 'If we had as many tractors as we have poems about tractors we wouldn't know where to put them.' Not only society, but also human nature, was allegedly transformed. There was a great deal of talk about 'the new man', who was said to conduct himself in every respect in a fashion undreamed of before. (This 'new man' went into

limbo after 1956, but I was fascinated to meet him again when I went to Cuba in 1968.) Social and psychological changes that would actually have taken decades even if all the material projects had been successful, even if everything had been done by genuine popular initiative and not under orders, and even if there had been no resentment against the privileged class of Party bosses and against the USSR—these changes were imagined to have been completed from one year to the next. I say 'imagined'. . . I don't know to this day how much was deception and how much was self-deception.

Nagy, in a document submitted to the Central Committee in December 1955, made an eloquent protest that was also a warning:

**Power is increasingly being torn away from the people and turned sharply against them. . . The leaders have made virtues of self-abasement, of cowardice, of hypocrisy, of lack of principle, and of lies. . . At atmosphere of suspicion and revenge is banishing the fundamental feature of socialist morality.**

Thus the Communist elite, by isolating themselves, produced just the situation that endangered them. **They** trusted no one, they listened to no one, no one was allowed to tell them the truth, and so they could not know what was going on outside their doors or the curtained windows of their limousines; could not know what the people thought and felt. But the people knew the truth, because that truth was their own experience. The result could only be an intense bitterness, and though it could be deflected by humour (both Poles and Hungarians are proud of their jokes, some of which are indeed very funny) it also built up into a growing anger. At least on the level of consciousness—and it is consciousness, after all, that makes men and women act—outraged impatience with the diet of lies was the fuel for the explosions of 1956.

It was in Poland that the truth was first openly spoken. After the serious disorders at Poznan, which led to many arrests, trials were held at which defendants and witnesses insisted on speaking freely. A young girl shouted: 'My father died for Poland in 1939 and now we are more oppressed than ever.' A young man related that his father had been falsely imprisoned and his mother forced to beg for free soup from a Catholic charity, and went on: 'Poverty made me steal. Can you imagine what this meant to me? My father brought me up in the socialist tradition.' A defence lawyer said: 'People now speak of violations of legality. That is easy to say, but how much suffering, how much unhappiness, lies in those words! The sentence against the defendants will be a sentence against all of us.'

When the lid was really off, it was seen that all the institutions and even the terminology of Communism had been discredited by their perversion under Stalinist regimes. A Hungarian writer, himself a disillusioned

Communist, records what happened **when Nagy** began his first speech to a huge crowd on the night of 23rd October:

'Comrades', he began—and there were protests and boos from all parts of the square. The demonstrators shouted back: 'We are not comrades!' ... At this moment all who had eyes must have understood that Hungary was rejecting not only **Stalin** and **Rákosi**, but all the dictates of the Party, whatever their manifestation. The Communist Party had encountered failure, and in an irrevocable **way**.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, soldiers tore the red star from their cap badges and the hammer-and-sickle emblem was cut out of the Hungarian flag. Naturally, this aspect of events was the most painful and disturbing for honest Communists, whether in Hungary or abroad, and the most gratifying for the capitalist press. And yet, what was being repudiated was not socialism itself, as an ideal or as a social system, but the Party's monopoly of power, its 'dictates'. Within a week, the multi-party government and the promise of elections became necessities.

Indeed, by 30th October the Communist Party had fallen apart. Typically, one member pasted his card on a wall with a note reading: 'A testimony to my stupidity'. The official newspaper, *Szabad Nép*, ceased publication after hailing the revolution in its last issue. (But new papers were appearing every day, and by that time there were twenty-five in Budapest). On 3rd November, **Kádár** announced on the radio the formation of a new party, to be called the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and based on 'Communists who fought against the despotism of **Rákosi**.' Its role would be 'to defend the cause of democracy and of socialism, the realisation of which should be achieved not by servile imitation of foreign examples but in compliance with the economic and historical peculiarities of our own country.'

The new Party organ told its readers:

We will no longer be a Party of a million members. We will operate in a more modest framework, with limited resources. Those who wish to join the Party must understand that their membership will bring them neither an important post nor an elevated position. . . Daily tasks, arduous and devoid of any gratitude, will be their lot. We face a harsh and laborious future, inconspicuous, without honour, without any false supremacy guaranteed by bayonets.

Given this dramatic repudiation of Communist rule, the question that arose—and was to be furiously debated throughout the European **Left**—was whether the Hungarian revolution was actually a counter-revolution. There are really two questions: (1) was it a genuine popular movement or, as orthodox Communism later claimed, a plot fomented by American agents? (2) what was its political content, and hence its probable outcome had it not been crushed? The first question is much the easier to answer.

**Kádár** himself is the best witness. In his broadcast of 3rd November, he said:

**In their glorious uprising, the people have shaken off the Rákosi regime.. . Thousands and thousands of workers and peasants, and veteran fighters who had been imprisoned on false charges—all fought in the front line. . . You were filled with true patriotism and with loyalty to socialism.**

Even if the speech was hypocritical (which on that date it obviously was) the necessity for speaking in such terms proves the point. On 13th November, though **Kádár** was by now a puppet ruler whose authority was guaranteed by fifteen Soviet armoured divisions, the necessity had not entirely ceased to operate. Speaking to delegates from the Budapest Central Workers' Council—his aim was to persuade them to call off the general strike which was their means of protest—he referred to 'the great popular movement of these last weeks' and said:

**The recent events in Hungary cannot be looked upon as a counter-revolution. But the fact cannot be ignored that, quite apart from the deep indignation of the workers. . . there were also counter-revolutionary manifestations in the rebellion.**

On the same occasion, **Kádár** repeated his belief in free elections and, making a realistic estimate of the popularity of the reconstituted Communist Party, remarked: 'We must envisage the possibility of total defeat in the elections.' It may be that he really intended to hold elections; if so, the Soviet ambassador told him not to be silly. At all events, whatever was said in *Pravda* or in the *Daily Worker*, no one in Hungary tried to deny that there had been a 'great popular movement' until many months later, when order had been fully restored and the process of myth-making could begin. There is not much myth-making, however, in the official *History of Hungary* prepared by the Academy of Sciences and published in 1973. It tells the reader disarmingly that 'serious and detailed historical research' into the recent period has not yet been undertaken, and it makes the obligatory allusion to 'counter-revolutionary groups'. But it is firm about the evils of the **Rákosi** regime; it says that in 1956 'the leadership was held in such low esteem and the strength of the opposing forces was so great. . . that the avalanche of events could no longer be stopped'; and in the context of the uprising it speaks of 'nationalist sentiments supported by a significant percentage of the workers.'

The striking fact is that the Hungarian conflict was in no sense a civil war—unlike, for example, the Spanish civil war in which, though it was right to speak of the Republican cause as 'the cause of the Spanish people', thousands of Spaniards did voluntarily fight for **Franco**. No Hungarians at all fought alongside the Soviet troops, except the men of

the AVH, and they were fighting for their lives. Thousands of Hungarians fought on the side of the uprising, and its strongholds were the working-class quarters of Budapest and industrial towns throughout the country. No Army or police units, let alone workers and peasants, obeyed Gero's call on 23rd October to 'defend the achievements of our people's democracy.' Soldiers and policemen either joined the insurgents, handed out weapons to them, or merely stood aside. A satirical poster, no doubt composed by someone who listened to Radio Moscow, declared:

**Ten million counter-revolutionaries are at large in the country. Former aristocrats, cardinals, generals and other supporters of the old regime, disguised as factory workers and peasants, are making propaganda against the patriotic government and against our Russian friends.**

The second question is more open to argument. There is certainly solid evidence for the view that Hungary would have remained a socialist country. Power 'on the ground'—and guns—were in the hands of workers' councils. All manifestoes by insurgent groups stressed determination to maintain the social gains of the post-war period. Nagy, of course committed to socialism, was by 30th October a highly popular and generally accepted figure. His coalition partners made statements like these:

**No one, I believe, wants to re-establish the world of the aristocrats, the bankers and the capitalists. That world is definitely gone. (Bela Kovács for the Smallholders' Party).**

**We shall retain the gains and conquests of socialism to the fullest extent that they can be useful in a free, democratic and socialist country, following the will of the people. (Ferenc Farkas for the National Peasant Party).**

Even Cardinal Mindszenty, the most obvious reactionary in Hungary, made a broadcast which was at worst ambiguous and was certainly not, as John Gollan called it, 'the virtual signal for the counter-revolutionary coup.'

On the other hand, most Hungarians were not socialists. In the 1945 election the Social-Democrats had won 71 seats and the Communists 67, while the Smallholders with 246 had a clear majority. The inspiration of the uprising was to a great extent the demand for national independence, with social objectives taking second place, and in Hungary it has never been easy to discern what is patriotism and what is chauvinism. I have noted the presence of indiscriminate anti-Communism. There was no real 'white terror', as Communist organs later claimed: but incidents like the one I described earlier show that any Communist functionary was suspect. Self-styled leaders here and there, and some councils in the provinces, were demanding a government with no Communist members of any stripe. George Mikes, a writer of Hungarian origin who was in Budapest during the

uprising as a BBC correspondent, has told us:

**Some people dragged out their hidden Horthyite uniforms and paraded in them. . . Reactionary parties smelling strongly of a disreputable past were also re-formed in the short period of the victorious revolution. . . I accept that there were reactionaries, even Fascists among the revolutionaries. There are such elements in all nations and as the Hungarian revolution embraced the whole nation, there must have been Fascists among the rebels too.<sup>5</sup>**

This is a fair view, I think; and of course the point of principle is that the task of dealing with reactionaries or Fascists belonged to the Hungarian people, not to the Soviet Army. But as to what kind of socialism would have endured in Hungary, one can only speculate. It is pretty certain that the collective farms would have been **dissolved** (in Poland, Gomulka allowed the peasants to revert to individual ownership and they were virtually unanimous in doing so). **Nagy** had been pushed by 2nd November into not merely securing the withdrawal of Soviet troops, but also announcing that Hungary would leave the Warsaw Pact and **follow** a policy of neutrality. In the circumstances this was likely to mean a more or less pro-Western policy, beginning no doubt with the acceptance of large-scale American aid to restore the economic situation. Dependence on western markets and investment by American or other capitalist interests could easily have followed, as both have followed in non-aligned Yugoslavia. But in Yugoslavia the national Communists hold undisputed power, whereas in Hungary this would not have been the case. Even in the revolutionary days there were voices in Hungary forecasting the country's future as 'a sort of Sweden' or 'a sort of Austria', and this might well have been the reality. An important point is that—in contrast to Czechoslovakia during the Dubcek period in 1968—there had been very little thinking about the lines on which a democratic form of socialism could be built. In this sense, the Hungarian revolution happened too soon.



Why did the **Soviet** Government decide that the Hungarian revolution had to be crushed? Was the departure of Soviet troops a mere trick, or was there a rapid change of mind in Moscow—and if so, why? Unluckily, the secrets of the Political Bureau are well guarded and historians are unlikely to be given access to the papers even after thirty years. It is also true that the period from the death of Stalin to the assumption of complete power by Khrushchev in June 1957 was one of exceptional flux. Decisions like the rebuff to **Rákosi** in 1953 (attributed to **Beria**, interestingly **enough**)<sup>6</sup> and his restoration in 1955 show that there was a large element of vacillation in external as well as internal policy, while Malenkov, Khrushchev, Molotov and others struggled for the levers of command.

Among the reasons advanced for Soviet action, the following seem significant:

1. On the military level, no General Staff likes to lose a position. Moreover, while the proposition up to 30th October was that Hungary would not be garrisoned (as indeed Czechoslovakia was not) but would remain an ally, the slide toward secession from the Warsaw Pact and neutrality was another matter and might well have been too much for Marshal Zhukov to swallow.
2. Again on the military level, the promise of withdrawal may have been a necessity. The local commander may not have consulted Moscow, and may have blundered, when he instantly responded to Gerő's request for intervention on 23rd October. (A similar request by Gomulka in 1970, when rioters overwhelmed the police at Gdansk, was rejected.) While no rational person would suggest that the Hungarian rebels could have defeated even the Soviet occupation force, that force may well have found itself in difficulties. A single rebel group in Buda is said to have knocked out thirty Soviet tanks, of which there were probably only a few hundred in the country. In several provincial centres the Russian officers came to terms with the rebels and agreed to remain passive unless they were fired on. The main Soviet base was in western Hungary, surrounded by liberated territory and not far from the Austrian frontier, which was soon open and unguarded. It is also suggested, though without much evidence, that Soviet soldiers who had been living in Hungary showed themselves to be unreliable. Altogether, to continue fighting during the last days of October presented problems, whereas to concentrate fresh forces for the 4th November operation was easy.
3. It was widely suggested in Britain that the news of the Suez adventure was a deciding factor. Actually, when the Political Bureau met on 30th October, reports of the Israeli advance were only a few hours old and Eden's ultimatum (prepared in great secrecy, and a surprise to the Americans too) can have come on the tapes only during the meeting. This suggests either quick thinking or panic. The Russian leaders would not have known yet that the Americans had been deceived by Eden, nor that they would take strong measures to check him. A natural suspicion would have been an aggressive move planned jointly by the imperialist powers (it was only a year since the USSR had begun to supply Egypt with arms and think seriously of winning a position in the Middle East)—possibly the danger of world war, in which a retreat from a forward position would have been a distinctly poor start.

Whatever weight one may attach to this theory, I was never much impressed by the related argument that Suez left the Russians free to use force in Hungary without being the only targets of moral odium. Naturally, this argument appealed to Labour leaders like Hugh Gaitskell and anti-Suez Tories who would have liked to see the West—

with Britain and the US in happy amity—concentrating on denouncing the Soviet Union. But (notwithstanding the vain hopes of many Hungarians and the criminally deceptive propaganda of Radio Free Europe) Khrushchev and Zhukov certainly knew that no Western power intended to take effective action to halt the Soviet action; and when the chips are down Moscow has never been greatly bothered by moral condemnations and the cancellation of ballet tours. There was no Suez in August 1968, but that didn't prevent the Russians from sending the tanks into Prague.

- But although the balance of moral guilt may not have influenced the decision, Suez did prove very useful to the USSR—especially, of course, in the third world. An Observer report from Karachi was typical enough: 'The war in Egypt—a sister Islamic country—killed interest in the Hungarian story. . . All Hungarian news was relegated to short paragraphs on inside pages of newspapers.' Nehru, who almost took India out of the Commonwealth in revulsion against the Suez aggression, uttered only formal disapproval of Russian behaviour. I can recall an evening at Doris Lessing's flat in which, after hours of agnized discussion about Hungary, one of her African friends was asked for his opinion; he said that, if we really wanted to know, he thought it was rather nice to see white people shooting other white people for a change.
4. Those who believed that Moscow's withdrawal statement had been sincere argued later that the situation in Hungary changed for the worse as the Soviet evacuation was beginning. Apologists for the Soviet action divided into those who upheld the pristine theory of the counter-revolutionary plot, and those who said that Nagy would have been all right but was being pushed off the stage by more sinister elements. This was the version first advanced by **Kádár**, who alleged in a radio speech of **11th** November that the 'total impotence' of the Nagy Government had 'opened the door to counter-revolutionary forces.' Of course, if this was true it could not also be true that Nagy was the master-mind of the 'armed revolt launched with the active collaboration of imperialists on 23rd October, 1956'—the version 'established' at his trial. But by that time plausibility had ceased to matter.'

In reality, any impotence attaching to the Nagy Government was being quickly overcome in the final days. Its authority was recognised by councils in provincial towns who had reserved their attitude before 30th October. Combatant groups accepted subordination to Colonel Paul **Maléter**, the **héro** of the defence of the Killian barracks in Budapest, as Minister of Defence at the head of a recognised **national** army. The morning of the 30th saw the last of the lynchings; after that, AVH men were taken into custody to have their individual records investigated. The workers' councils agreed to call off their strikes, trains and city transport began to run again, shops re-opened and food supplies became

normal. **József Dudás**, who was trying to set himself up as a rival of Nagy and had a band of armed adherents, was arrested—the order was executed promptly, providing a convincing demonstration of the Government's **strength**.<sup>8</sup> Altogether, the most charitable thing one can say is that these hopeful signs appeared too late, since the juggernaut of re-occupation was already rolling. (This would excuse Khrushchev but not **Kádár**, who was pretending to be loyal to **Nagy** until late on 3rd November.) One could also say, however, that what Moscow found intolerable was not the impotence of the Nagy regime but its consolidation.

5. Mikes, among others, urges that the turning-point was the formation of the multi-party Government and the promise of free elections:

**'The Soviet Union might have tolerated an independent, Communist Hungary; but the decision to hold free elections was an altogether different matter. . . It was all right for Hungary to become a second Poland; but for her to become a second Finland, or even Austria, was not on the Russian agenda.'**<sup>9</sup>

This seemed convincing at the time, especially in view of the Soviet decision to tolerate Gomulka, who appeared to be as much of a 'national Communist' as Nagy. (Of course, Poles would say now that the Russians knew more about Gomulka than the rest of us did.) But the explanation loses much of its force when one thinks of Moscow's **1968** decision to put paid to dissidence in Czechoslovakia, where there was no question of a multi-party government, the Communist Party had not collapsed but was functioning vigorously, and the perspective was certainly that of an 'independent, Communist' regime.

So one is driven to the conclusion that the Soviet rulers will not tolerate, in any of the countries subject to their power, the existence of a Government free to take its own decisions and to **remould** society in response to popular aspirations; that this was as true in **1968** as in **1956**, and is doubtless just as true in **1976**.

One further question remains. How is that the **Kádár** regime contrived, from about **1960** onward, to become reasonably viable and—so most reports indicate—to gain a degree of popularity among the Hungarian people? This has been quite a surprise to all the people who wrote in **1956** (including **Mervyn Jones** in *Tribune*) that Hungarians would never be reconciled to this traitor and quisling. Many Hungarians who fought in the uprising and were passionate followers of Nagy have since accepted posts of **responsibility** and are doing their best to make the system work. The contrast with Czechoslovakia is striking. There, eight years after the installation of Husak as the **Kádár** of Prague, few if any adherents of Dubcek have been lured into working for the regime, and the moral and political gulf between Government and people remains as wide as ever.

**Kádár**, in fact, made serious efforts to avoid any restoration **of** the **Rákosi** system. He benefited from the gentler winds blowing in Moscow, where anti-Stalinism reached its peak in the early **1960's**, and (it's said) from good personal relations with Khrushchev. People imprisoned for their part in the uprising were released long before the expiry of their sentences and the AVH, with its apparatus of persecution and torture, was not rebuilt. Hungary to this day is in advance of the rest of the Communist bloc in terms of intellectual tolerance and of **decision-making** based on taking intelligent soundings of opinion. And in the economic sphere it was not too difficult, through rational management and a cautious version of Yugoslav methods, to produce a marked improvement in living standards. Real wages, which had sunk from a 1949 index figure of 100 to 87 in 1953, were up to 159 in 1962.

Most important, perhaps, is the most developed and confident ideology of democratic socialism that took the field in the Prague of 1968—over a period of months, too, rather than ten hectic days—compared to the Budapest of 1956. And the reforming Communists of Czechoslovakia need not feel themselves to be alone; their ideas and hopes are echoed, notably in Italy and throughout the international Communist movement. Despite the dead weight of Moscow, despite all the heartbreaks **of** the last twenty years and the heartbreaks doubtless yet to come, there is a real sense in which we are entitled to say: *Eppur si muove*.



The **double** shock of Hungary and Suez awoke many people, and especially young people, from a kind of political trance. In Britain (I speak of Britain through experience, but in most respects the judgement applies elsewhere) politics had largely ceased to be a real concern. There was a Left in the Labour Party, represented by the figure of Aneurin **Bevan**, but the dominance of right-wing leaders in the trade unions forced it to batter in vain against the impregnable fortress of the party machine. On the industrial front, union bosses like Arthur Deakin sent in their metaphorical tanks against unofficial strikes and openly declared that they were happy to deal **amicably** with Tory ministers. Left of **Bevan**, there was nothing but an impeccably Stalinist CP and a handful of Trotskyist ascetics. What one felt most miserably was an absence of genuine belief or genuine protest. 'There aren't any good, brave causes left—Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* seemed to speak for a generation. The phrase was widely quoted, with a kind of melancholy guilt; and yet the play, produced in May 1956, was also one of the signals of still inchoate stirrings.

The first impact of the shock, after a period in which events were generally heard through **mufflings** of cotton-wool, derived from its brutality. Guns were actually firing and killing people; Tories like Eden

were not gentlemen after all, nor was Khrushchev a fumbling but amiable reformer.

According to the chief surgeon, Dr. **Esseldine** Hoseny, more than **500** Egyptians died in his hospital during the two days of fighting in Port Said. At one point corpses were piled nearly as high as a man's head in three sheds and covered the entire back lawn of the hospital. (Report in *Time*.)

British and French tanks went into the Arab quarter. If a sniper was sighted, a shell was fired at the window where he had been seen. . . Many people were killed in this way. Many more were burned to death. (Report in the *Daily Herald*.)

The Russians behaved with a savagery which surpassed their outrages in **1945** and even those of **1849**. On innumerable occasions they opened fire on bread queues. It only took a single shot to be fired from a building for the huge tanks to stop in front of it and fire at it until it was razed to the ground. **Ulloi Road**. . . practically all the university hospitals stood along this street, one beside the other. Most of them were bombarded, shelled with phosphorous or ordinary shells, many were burnt out, and hundreds of patients, nurses and doctors were killed and wounded. (Mikes, *The Hungarian Revolution*.)

The second impact came from the stench of hypocrisy, transparently false excuses, and plain lies that accompanied both aggressions. The Suez ultimatum was intrinsically dishonest, since the Israelis were told to keep away from the objective—the canal—which they were far from reaching, while the Egyptians were being told to keep clear of a vital artery well within their national territory and behind the bulk of their army. It was soon obvious that the aim of Anglo-French intervention was really to bring down Nasser, the 'military dictator' seen by Eden as a personal enemy. A 'black' radio station in Cyprus was putting out false news in Arabic and urging the Egyptians to rise against Nasser (of course, they rallied round him). Suspicions quickly arose, too, that Eden and Mollet had not been surprised by the Israeli attack, as they claimed, but had been in collusion to take advantage of it. This word 'collusion' became the big issue of succeeding weeks. It is now known that the whole operation had been concerted at a secret meeting near Paris on 16th **October**.<sup>10</sup>

As for Hungary, the contradiction between the Moscow statement of 30th October and the onslaught of 4th November spoke for itself. The re-occupation was supposed to have been requested by **Kádár's** new Government, which could not have existed when the dawn attack was launched and was never constituted even under the most rudimentary procedures applied in 'people's democracies'. The Soviet ambassador made repeated denials when questioned by Nagy about reports of Soviet troop movements. **Maléter** was kidnapped by a trick, when visiting Soviet military headquarters on 3rd November to discuss details of the supposed evacuation (it is said that the Soviet general was not informed and was offended by the irruption of KGB men): Nagy was later kidnapped by

another trick. And so on, and so forth.

Stomachs were turned, too, by the outpourings of ideological deception and self-deception—if one may use the word 'ideology' to describe the death-flush of British imperialism. The boasts of the period make pathetic reading today. 'I see Suez as a challenge to our greatness', declared General Glubb, lately bundled out of Jordan where he had commanded the Arab Legion. A now defunct paper, the *Daily Sketch*, assured its readers: 'We do not believe that Nasser would face force even for a day.' (It identified him helpfully as 'the curly-haired mountebank of Cairo'.) In the House of Commons, Tory **MPs** were moved to utter phrases like this: 'I find myself proud to be living upon this day' (Lord Hinchingsbrooke). . . 'There are millions of people in every continent who are now thanking God that British leadership in the world has revived' (Mr. John Biggs-Davison). . . 'We have accepted the risks. I believe we shall soon see the prizes.' (Mr. Nigel Fisher).

Meanwhile, the Communist press was justifying intervention in Hungary with phrases about 'proletarian internationalism', 'aid to the fraternal Hungarian people', and 'defence of socialist achievements'. The **Rákosi** regime in all its ugliness was not being restored, although at the time one could not be sure of that. But what was certainly being restored was the contrast between reality and deception.

Out of anger at the killing and disgust at the lies, there came about a rebirth of the moral sense in relation to politics. Good, brave causes—and resistance to fraudulent, evil causes—began to matter again. Not much more than a year after Suez and Hungary, we saw the astonishing response to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In the early 1960's **young** English men and women were willing to sit down on missile sites and incur jail sentences of eighteen months—serious sentences for us, if not by the yardsticks of eastern Europe. Before 1956 that would not have happened, or would have been a disregarded instance of individual quixotry. After the period of the Aldermaston marches came the period of protest against the Vietnam war. I have a sad feeling that this capacity for strong feeling, for alertness and response, has waned in the 1970's; but it is still stronger than in the dull years before 1956.

Moral conviction, we know, has to go hand in hand with political understanding. This too showed itself in new forms. Three of the side-effects are worth mentioning: (1) Israeli complicity in the Suez aggression sowed the first doubts about whether the cause of Israel was necessarily the cause of the Left. (2) In France, the guilty men of Suez—outstandingly, Guy Mollet—were leaders of the Socialist Party. Their own brand of pseudo-ideology ('*ces hommes de la Résistance incarnaient dans la gauche de l'Assemblée une tradition jacobine de lutte ouverte contre les tyrans agressifs*')<sup>11</sup> soon fell apart, the more so as their guilt extended to the horrors of the Algerian war. Across the interlude of Gaullism, one can

trace the collapse of this rotten old party and its present revival in a considerably more respectable form. (3) Suez was the last flicker of the authentic old British jingoism. The way in which Britain was brought to heel by the US settled once and for all the relations between the declining and the dominant capitalist power; but there was also, despite a skilful rearguard action by Harold Macmillan, a crucial loss of heart in the Tory Party, and one of the consequences was the concession of independence to most of Britain's African colonies in the ensuing years.

However, one must repeat that if Suez was the end of an era (or the irrelevant postscript to it) Hungary was an early landmark in a still unfolding process. In 1956 we called it de-Stalinisation; now we can see it as a laborious and complex turn toward new perspectives of socialism. It is no denigration of the Hungarian rebels to say, as I think one must, that the lesson they gave us was more negative than positive. They showed conclusively that the old model of despotic Communism was barren and useless. Their repudiation automatically raised the question of what should be put in its place.

Among Marxists, and within Communist Parties such as the British, there had been attempts at new thinking for a number of years. In 1945-48 the idea of 'people's democracy' in eastern Europe—as a form of society that was emphatically socialist but was not the dictatorship of the proletariat—had been seen as innovative and fertile, until the theory was buried under the reality of Soviet tutelage. The debate revived with the 'thaw' following Stalin's death and was greatly stimulated by the revelations of the Twentieth Congress. Then came the Polish October. . . and then came Hungary.

The Communist Party, naturally enough, reeled under the shock. About 7,000 out of 33,000 members left. The *Daily Worker* (which had refused to print the reports of its own correspondent in Hungary, and in various ways covered itself with shame and ridicule) lost prominent and irreplaceable members of its staff. The Party leaders floundered about, uncertain whether to resist all criticisms or to make concessions. Their most obvious difficulty was that they had no sanctions against frank discussion, which often took place on what had been secure territory. For instance, Unity Theatre presented a 'living newspaper' on Hungary and Suez, and the cast and audiences stayed for discussions that went on half the night, in which some speakers roundly condemned both **Khrushchev** and Gollan. Neither 'loyalty to the Party' nor 'loyalty to the Soviet Union' could be relied on to bring the old Pavlovian reactions.

Fruitful developments were handicapped by the cheap paeans of the press to Hungary's 'freedom fighters'—it was easier for the *Daily Worker* to claim that they had fought to bring Hungary over to the 'western way of life', if the *Daily Express* said so too—and by the general wave of anti-communism. In Paris the Party headquarters was attacked by a crowd of

Fascists (or they were naturally so described in *l'Humanité*) which was quite a windfall. It was also regrettable, though inevitable, that to the individual Communist the issue presented itself as one of whether to stay in the Party or not. Some ~~people~~ who thoroughly disagreed with the line considered that they ought nevertheless to keep their cards, and quarrelled with friends who were leaving.

Now that one looks **back**, the encouraging thing is that so many of those who left the CP—in a mood of understandable bitterness and **disillusion**—retained their socialist convictions. (In saying this, I don't mean to imply that those who stayed have no such convictions.) They joined with socialists who had never been in the CP, or had left it earlier, to set up Socialist Forums and similar bodies all over the place, opening a period of lively discussion which was greatly aided by journals such as the *New Reasoner* and, a little later, the *New Left Review*. Some joined the Labour Party, some found their way in time into groups such as International Socialism, some remained unattached and simply talked and wrote. When CND started, one often found an ex-Communist running the local group. As a whole, what may be called the 'generation of 1956' has made a noteworthy contribution to the politics of the Left and of the Labour movement. It certainly has been a factor in loosening the grip of the heirs of Gaitskell on the Labour Party and carrying on a fight for socialist policies.

In France and Italy, not so many people were inclined to leave Communist Parties that possessed massive working-class support. But there was, none the less, a widespread and insistent pursuit of all the questions raised in 1956. It had been assumed hitherto that a socialist France (or Italy) would be another recruit to the ranks of 'people's democracies', whose alleged successes had been so ritualistically lauded. But ought this to be so, now that at least two of these countries had witnessed a violent repudiation of the system by their own people? Must there be the same subservience to the USSR and alienation of national feelings, the same copying of Soviet methods and institutions, the same rigid discipline and police power, the same outlawing of independent thought, the same **single**-list elections, the same monopoly of power by the Communist Party? The Italian Communists under **Togliatti** made a flexible and thoughtful response to these questions, and benefited accordingly. The French Communist leaders set their faces against new thinking and paid the price in May 1968, when the younger generation preferred to follow the independent groupuscules and a great popular movement got under way against the will and outside the control of the CP.

It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the steps whereby the international **Communist** movement has freed itself from the dogmatic control of a single orthodoxy. In the course of the **1960's**, however—with China presenting a radically different model of socialist society, with heretical Yugoslavia readmitted to the discussion table, with fresh ideas

coming from the third world—Togliatti's dictum that there could be 'no single centre' of socialist development became a plain statement of fact. The demand for national independence was no longer a mere concession to traditional patriotism, but the hopeful pre-condition for variety and initiative. Clearer conceptions of a genuinely democratic form of socialism had been worked out—among western Communists, in the third world, in eastern Europe, and even in the Soviet Union. In 1956 it was axiomatic that the Soviet use of force in Hungary would be endorsed by all official Communist Parties, not to mention 'reliable' fellow-travellers. In 1968 the invasion of Czechoslovakia was condemned by most of these parties—even, with some gritting of the teeth, by the French. This indeed was the start of a change in the French CP, which by degrees has pretty well aligned itself with the Italian. Both stand openly for national independence, rejection of the Soviet model as an infallible guide, diversity of opinion, and a multi-party system under socialism.

When the people of Budapest took to the streets in 1956, they expressed a simple repudiation of the travesty of socialism to which they had been subjected. Yet their action made this travesty unacceptable, for the future, to the intellects and consciences of honest socialists and communists anywhere; and so it was bound to lead to a refashioning of all our hopes and purposes. Twenty years after the confusion and the tragedy, that ought not to be forgotten.

## NOTES

1. *Les Secrets de l'Expédition d'Égypte*, by Merry and Serge Bromberger (Editions des Quatre Fils Aymon, 1957). This curious book, which gives a completely frank account of the aims and planning of the Suez operation, seems to have been fundamentally the work of Guy Mollet. Its main thesis is that Mollet's plan was bound to lead to success, but was stymied by fatal changes on which Eden insisted.
2. The steel complex (named after Stalin, naturally) worked at half-cock because the plan was based on the use of Yugoslav iron ore, which did not arrive after the 1948 break. This might have been admitted without undue loss of face, one would imagine, but it never was.
3. *Thirteen Days that Shook the Kremlin*, by Tibor Meray (Thames & Hudson, 1958), p. 80.
4. The 'White Book' later published by the Kádár regime to sustain the thesis of counter-revolution found 143 'Communists' killed by the rebels; it is certain that the great majority were AVH men. By comparison, over 200 people were killed—before the lynchings—when the AVH fired on unarmed crowds in Budapest and at Magyaróvár. A detailed account of the latter incident is in *Hungarian Tragedy*, by Peter Fryer, the *Daily Worker* correspondent (Dennis Dobson, 1956). A report by the Indian Embassy stated that 7,000 Hungarians were killed by the Soviet troops, but this can only be an estimate.
5. Mikes, *The Hungarian Revolution* (Deutsch, 1957), p. 161.
6. Meray, p. 7.

7. **Fragments** of the trial of **Nagy** and his **associates** were published in the 'White Book'; the '**evidence**' is as poorly **concocted** as in the **Moscow trials** of the **1930's**. **Nagy's nefarious plans were said to be found in a 'secret document'**, which ~~was~~ in fact the statement he had submitted to the Central Committee in **1955**. He was said to have given orders for the '**forcible overthrow of the legal Hungarian Government**' at a meeting of conspirators in Budapest at a time when he **had** actually been seen by hundreds of people at a wine-harvest festival in the countryside.
8. **Meray**, p. 228. **Dudás** was executed in January **1957**.
9. Mikes, p. **139**.
10. The details of collusion are now of purely academic interest, but they may be pursued in **Guilty Men 1957**, by **Michael Foot** and **Menyn Jones (Gollancz, 1957)** and in the Brombergers' book
11. **Bromberger**, p. **11**. It was this **sentence** that **convinced me** that the book was written by **Mollet**, at least in the **sense** that the famous **Short History of the CPSU** was written by **Stalin**.