

ISTVAN BIBO AND THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF HUNGARIAN DEMOCRACY

Ferenc Donith

Introduction

When Soviet tanks attacked Budapest on 4 November 1956, most members of the Government of Imre Nagy created during the revolution fled either into hiding or into the apparent security of the Yugoslav Embassy. One man, however, remained at his post in the Parliament, expecting to be arrested by the Russians, and hoping thereby to demonstrate before the whole world that their invasion of Hungary was an illegal act against the legitimate government of a sovereign state. Summoning foreign correspondents to a press conference in the Parliament, he prepared an appeal praising the genuinely democratic spirit of the revolution and protesting to the world against its forcible suppression. This man was István Bibó, appointed only the previous day as minister of state in Imre Nagy's Government.

Bibó's press conference never took place, but nor was he arrested by the Russians. In fact he remained in the Parliament for another two days, leaving only at noon on 6 November. In the following weeks and months, he was to put forward compromise proposals for a possible settlement with the Russians, and to do what he could to keep the world informed of the situation of the Hungarian people under foreign occupation. Six months later, on 23 May 1957, he was arrested, to be subsequently tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. Amnestied and released on 27 March 1963, he died sixteen years later on 10 May 1979.¹

At the time of his death, Bibó's name was not widely known in Hungary, outside of a narrow circle of writers and intellectuals. But amongst those who knew of him, many would have considered him the most outstanding political thinker of the last fifty years in Hungary. Indeed, when an underground samizdat literature began to emerge in Hungary at the beginning of 1977, Bibó's political essays about the coalition period in Hungary after the Second World War, had been amongst the first items to appear. Less than two years after his death, so widespread had become the interest in his ideas, that a collection of essays written in his memory was to provide one of the main subjects for discussion at a meeting of the Hungarian Communist Party's highest body, the Politburo, held on 9 December 1980.

The period that had really fired Bibó's imagination was the three years

following the Second World War, between the collapse of the counter-revolutionary Horthy regime and the installation of a Stalinist dictatorship in 1948, a time when the opportunity had really seemed to exist for a radical democratisation of Hungarian society. Indeed, he is once said to have remarked that he would have liked his gravestone to bear the inscription: 'lived from 1945 to 1948'. This was the period when a coalition government was formed between the four anti-fascist democratic parties—the Communists, the Social Democrats, the Smallholders' Party, and the more left-wing National Peasant Party of which Bibó was himself a member. The most radical aspect of this period, however, was for Bibó not the parties but the mushrooming popular committees that sought to take over public order at the local level, offering the prospect of establishing a real grass-roots democracy in which power would be directly exercised by the people themselves. It is his writings about this period that have created the greatest interest, and that are perhaps the most significant in pointing the way to a real democratisation of Hungarian society today.²

As Bibó approached his seventieth birthday, a number of his friends decided to prepare a collection of essays in his honour. When he died at the age of sixty-seven, the project was transformed into that of a memorial volume. A ten-member editorial committee was formed to supervise the work. It included representatives of a wide range of viewpoints amongst Hungarian intellectual and oppositional circles, and was headed by an old friend of Bibó, the former Communist and close colleague of Imre Nagy in 1956, Ferenc Donáth. The volume, *In Memoriam Istvan Bibo*, was finally completed by September 1980—1001 pages in length, comprising articles from 76 different contributors.

First presented to the Hungarian publishing house Gondolat, the possibility of the volume's publication became the subject of a debate which reached the highest levels of political and cultural life, culminating in the Politburo session of 9 December 1980, and the commissioning of a special report on the book by the Scientific, Educational and Cultural Section of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Finally, the publishing house returned the manuscript which has since started to circulate in samizdat.³

The present article is the contribution to the memorial volume by the chairman of its editorial committee, Ferenc Donáth. A long-standing Communist, Donáth had joined the illegal party in the late fifties, and soon became one of its leading activists within Hungary. After the war, he became a member of its leading body, the Central Committee, and as an Under-Secretary of State in the Ministry of Agriculture he was closely involved in the implementation of the land reform. Arrested in 1951 at the height of the Stalinist purges, he spent three and a half years in prison and was released under Imre Nagy's first premiership in 1954. When the revolution broke out in 1956, he was one of the first to insist on seeing it

as a popular uprising, and to call on the Communist Party to support the people's demands. Re-appointed to the Central Committee, he became a member of *Imre Nagy's* personal secretariat, and also of the preparatory committee set up by *János Kádár* to organise a new Communist Party. After the revolution he was put on trial along with *Imre Nagy* and sentenced to twelve years imprisonment, then amnestied and released in 1960. When stirrings of a democratic opposition began to re-emerge in Hungary in the late 1970's, *Donáth* was to align himself with them, becoming a signatory to their letter in support of the Czechoslovak Charter 77 movement in January 1977, and to the protest letter against the Prague trials of Charter activists in October 1979,

Bill Lomax

NOTES

1. For *Bibó's* role in 1956, see Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, London, Allison & Busby, 1976, pp. 171-175. For his writings during and after the revolution, see Melvin J. Lasky (ed.), *The Hungarian Revolution*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1957, p. 234, and *The Truth about the Nagy Affair*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1959, pp. 139-146.
2. *Bibó's* political essays are, unfortunately, not available in English, or any other western language. Two collections, however, exist in Hungarian: *István Bibó, Harmadik Út* (The Third Way), London, Magyar Könyves Céh, 1960, and *Bibó István: 1911-1979, Magyar Füzetek* (Hungarian Notebooks), No. 4, Paris, 1979.
3. The *Bibó* memorial volume, and the circumstances of its production, is discussed in more detail in the report of the Scientific, Educational and Cultural Section of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Communist Party) prepared at the request of the Politburo for the Department of Agitation and Propaganda. (A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottsága Tudományos-, Közoktatási- és Kulturális osztályának tájékoztató jelentése a párt Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottsága számára a *Bibó* Emlékkönyvről, Budapest, 1981.)



The year 1945 presented an exceptional historical opportunity to the Hungarian believers in social progress. We saw collapsing before our very eyes, and as if from one day to the next, all the powerful internal forces that had so far blocked the transformation of a feudalistic, hierarchical world into a democratic social order. True, a high price was paid for the war, both in terms of human life and material wealth, and we still cannot be sure that our sacrifices have yet come to an end. We are still more the objects of historical development than its active creators, and we have little freedom of action in regard to our own fate. Indeed, this has always been a decisive factor in the whole course of our social development.

In the spring of 1945, however, we felt as though liberty had fallen into our laps. The beneficiaries, representatives and servants of the

allegedly unchangeable old order disappeared from public life, many of them leaving the country for the West. The change was most striking in the countryside. There the 'Office'—the symbol of power—ceased to function. Silent council chambers, empty gendarmerie barracks, shuttered stately mansions, proclaimed more tellingly than words that the old order had vanished, never to return. Millions of ordinary people, who had long dreamed of a world of their own choosing, now saw their hopes justified by the speedy and thoroughgoing break-up of the great estates, and their distribution amongst the poor peasants.

It seemed for a while, in spite of the hair-raising difficulties facing the country in the aftermath of war, that a way was opening towards the material and spiritual advance of the whole people. We appeared to enjoy the support of the great world powers, whose only wish seemed to be that we should live in peace with our neighbours, and in democracy and freedom ourselves. There appeared to be no more urgent task than that of creating a broad consensus concerning our country's problems, their import and the methods of their solution. In essence, the question was what did we want Hungarian democracy to be like.

This was the common view, regardless of party, of all those adherents of progress who had taken part in public life throughout the thirties. We shared a common assumption; we felt that the democratic camp was unanimous in respect of the basic conditions of mutual understanding and co-operation, implicit in which was a commitment to the cause of the working masses, which also meant a commitment to a democratic transformation that would bring about a thorough root-and-branch rejection of the past.

What was the most fundamental issue, in this context, of Hungarian democracy in 1945? This question must be our starting point.

And what better yardstick could there be for judging the contribution to public life of István Bibó, or anybody else for that matter, than their standpoint on this question? After all, we are hardly going to take as our 'most objective' yardstick the March of Time, and thus accept the course of defeated revolutions, crushed struggles for liberty, so characteristic of the entire history of the Hungarian people.

What was then the key issue, the one most crucial to the future development of our public life? Was it that of the coalition of democratic parties and its maintenance at any price? Or was it the gradual strengthening of left-wing parties within this coalition, in order to ensure the positions of power indispensable to a radical transformation of social and economic relations? Or was it the continuing struggle against the remnants of fascism and reaction, the self-defence of democracy, accepting the necessity not

only of forcibly suppressing the forces of reaction but also of limiting the creation of new parties and restricting the suffrage? All of these were important issues, standing in the forefront of political debate at that time, for the infant Hungarian democracy.

The most truly fundamental issue of the whole process of democratic transformation, however, was different. *It was whether, and to what extent, it would be possible to ensure entrenched, institutional positions for an effective participation in the whole range of public affairs by ordinary working people.* Might there be a chance for a process of development that would not only put an end to the pseudo-parliamentarism of the past, together with its corrupt representatives (who had, anyway, never provided more than a flimsy cover for the actual dictatorship of a minority) but which would also go beyond the self-proclaimed 'genuine democracy' of a purely parliamentary regime which was also no more than *representation* of the people, and not *rule* by the people?

A truly democratic transformation could only have been achieved in Hungary by regulating public affairs in such a manner that, having regard to the unfavourable economic and political conditions, *gradual*, but no less real, opportunities would have been created for the direct participation of *working people* in the making of important decisions about their common problems—at the level of both small and larger communities and, eventually, in the broadest community of all, ~~the~~ the whole nation.

There was evidence that such a transformation in **1945** was not just a pipedream, a doctrinaire idea divorced from reality, and this was the speedy and successful execution of the land reform, an act of the greatest significance for our social development. The land reform was the achievement of tens of thousands of poor peasants working in land allocation committees, engaging the active co-operation of hundreds and thousands of their fellows, and thereby creating radically new, democratic relations of land ownership. Legal rules and sanctions did no more than provide a flexible framework for this spontaneous mass action.

In **1945** the full depth of democratic transformation was far from accurately mirrored in the numbers and proportions of votes cast for the various political parties. Parliamentary democracy is in fact unable to reflect such changes, since, by definition, no parliamentary regime can be more than a system of representation. The true depth of change can only be measured by assessing how far the old institutions have been replaced by new ones, and by new ones that serve not only as more appropriate tools for the successful discharge of common tasks, but also as schools for democracy.

In **1945** there were few people to be found in the higher regions of political life who interpreted democracy by the measure of direct participation of working people in the exercise of public power. There was not one political party that stood for this type of democracy, or if one did so it

was only temporarily and in exceptional circumstances. Public affairs were dominated by the phenomena of representative democracy, by the structures, programmes and activities of political parties. The direct involvement of working people in public affairs hardly ever featured in the contemporary press. If it did, it was dismissed as something of little significance, or even assailed as a miscarriage of democracy. After this, it appeared as though the Hungarian people didn't even have any desire to take part in public affairs.

The facts speak otherwise

Official history either suppresses or disparages those facts which are contrary to the ruling ideology and must be expunged from public consciousness, even though they offer the most hopeful prospects for the development of both society and the individual. However, we do not wish to deal with questions of ideology in the present essay. Indeed, we don't even intend to explain why, in our opinion, the mass movement of **1956** was, despite certain counter-revolutionary features and aspects, a genuine revolution. We propose simply to point out certain facts and relationships; for example the fact that, besides the re-shaping of our relations with the Soviet Union, **1956** has presented us with another key problem relating to the entire course our social development has taken since **1945**. In the same way, we can only indicate here, in a somewhat sketchy manner, how this problem made its appearance in the thinking of István Bibó.

The popular movement of **1945** was not an exceptional or unique feature of modern Hungarian history. It represented a phenomenon, the most important aspects of which are, in our opinion, the following:

a) In the past half century *the Hungarian working people* have *three times* demonstrated their determination to demand a share in the exercise of public power. First, following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, then at the ignominious end of the counter-revolutionary Horthy regime, and finally with the complete bankruptcy of the Stalinist dictatorship of Rákosi—that is, in the course of each great crisis that shook up both society and social thought—mass movements and mass actions arose in which the working people seized and exercised functions of power with astonishing spontaneity. *They made a serious attempt to re-establish on entirely new foundations the relationship between society* (i.e. the working masses) *and the state* i.e. those social forces organised as, or just becoming organised as, the state.

What we see here is *a recurring phenomenon*, repeating itself at not too long intervals; it is part and parcel of a historical process.

b) This process is one that has been ripening and rolling forward with every day that passes, presenting itself to us with ever-growing strength and promise. It sweeps forward carrying with it ever-larger, ever-more varied, masses of working people.

Already in **1945**, but even more so in **1956**, the unity and preparedness of the working people had, within the space of a few days, led to the creation of popular organs displaying a remarkable identity of views, and without any initiative whatever from above. We know very little about how this consensus amongst the working people emerges and takes shape, in a society where publicity for any kind of criticism, especially any rejection of the dictatorship, is denied. But this is also the reason why in **1956** the popular revolt came as a complete surprise even to those who ought to have expected it.

In its broad outline, this process is characterised by the fact that increasing, and ever more socially mixed, masses of the people come to take part in the popular movement demanding a share in the exercise of public power. In **1918-19**, as well as the urban working class and substantial numbers of middle-class intellectuals, it was the landless labourers in the villages who became activated. In **1944-45** the class basis of the various popular organs that took charge of the tasks of authority broadened out; alongside the working class there now appeared the representatives of small property owners, particularly of peasant smallholders. The participation of small property owners in the re-shaping of the organs of public authority clearly represented the broadening and advance of the process.

By **1956** the mass movement was one virtually uniting the whole people in its demand for a radical change in the exercise of public power. It was a popular uprising, accompanied by outbreaks of armed revolt in the capital and a few other towns.

The most prominent political demands—for national independence, the establishment of basic freedoms, and restoration of the multi-party system—united the whole nation for a time, and thus gave great strength and impetus to the popular movement. The uprising was the result of the profound dissatisfaction of all social groups with the economic policies of the system, with the existing relations of production and ownership, and, last but not least, with the efforts of the state to direct and control practically every facet of social life, regardless of people's natural feelings about their human rights, their moral standards and their national pride. The uprising was an elemental outbreak of righteous indignation by a people who felt themselves deeply humiliated, a people whose human and national feelings had been deeply offended.

*Behind this wish for change in which the entire people were united, however, the different classes of society were pursuing widely divergent aims. A great difference between **1945** and **1956**, not to speak of **1918-19**, was that in **1956** it was not just the working classes who demanded a radical change in the exercise of public affairs, with the aim of satisfying their democratic, social and moral claims, and improving the material conditions of their existence. This time they were joined by the losers of **1945**, by those classes who had then lost their formerly important roles in*

public life, and who now looked for the restitution of their former power, influence and property.

It is a special characteristic of the 1956 popular uprising that both democratic and anti-democratic forces acted in unison in the pursuit of common political goals. In the course of the uprising, indeed within the space of a few hours, old reactionaries were to make common cause with both genuine democrats and other progressive social forces. The first group in fact sought a restoration of the **pre-1945** system behind some form of democratic facade, while the democrats stood on the basis of the **1945** parliamentary system and wanted to carry on with public affairs as they had operated before the **1947-48** Communist takeover. Other social forces, however, including first and foremost the working class, wanted to go beyond parliamentarism towards a system of more direct democracy. There are many other episodes in history attesting that such a temporary unity among social groups of very divergent interests is quite possible, and especially when it is fuelled by an upsurge of national feeling such as that to which we were witnesses, indeed participants in, in **1956**.

The unity of political action in 1956, however, did not—could not—abolish these separate and contrary interests that had found common expression in the mass movement aiming at a radical change in the existing system of property relations. It could only relegate them to the background. This was the case in **1956** both before and after **4** November.

Such mass actions as these have particular significance in a dictatorship. Not only do they bring to the attention of the whole world, in the most direct and authentic way, the aspirations of the broadest groupings in society, but they also represent an accelerated stage in the development of class consciousness. In this respect, the activities of the Hungarian workers' councils between **23** October and **10** December are particularly illuminating.

The framework and scene of mass actions—popular organs given different names, mass meetings, demonstrations and other forms of the mass movement—were much the same in **1956** as they had been in **1945**. The activities of the popular organs were rooted in the common agreement of the social groups involved. They proclaimed themselves to be organs of authority, and drew their legitimacy from the trust of the people—in **1956** just as in **1945**.

The popular organs created in **1956**, however, were in several significant aspects different from those of **1945**:

a) In **1956** the number of popular organs coming to exercise power, as well as the number of activists taking part in them, was much greater than in **1945**. Not only was public administration taken over and put to serve the general interest, or to perform specific tasks, as had happened in **1945**, but popular organs—revolutionary committees—were set up in offices, institutions and other public bodies too, and, most important of all, this

occurred in factories and other organs of the economy as well—where workers' councils were formed.

b) These new organs did not spring up in response to some governmental decree or to any other central directive, as had generally been the case in **1945**, but arose spontaneously, against and in spite of the intentions of the state.

c) Neither in their setting up nor in their functioning did the political parties play any role. Nor had these organisations the character of a party coalition.

One factor that could have been particularly crucial for the future political organisation of Hungarian society was that the organs of self-government which came into existence in the economy, and particularly in industry, were characterised not by the divisiveness of loyalties to different political parties but by an overriding spirit of working class solidarity.

This however is more than a formal question of the origins and functions of the popular organs. In **1956**, the demands of the people for a share in the exercise of public power were richer in content than those of **1945**.

In **1945** these demands were concerned with the exercise of *local functions and decisions*. Admittedly some popular organs did come into existence whose authority extended over larger areas (e.g. national committees for certain districts and counties, though it should be noted that the Countrywide National Commission, created by the political parties, was neither popular in origin, nor a body in possession of any power) but these, with a few exceptions, did not function effectively—or if they did, they did so only until they were taken over by the political parties.

In **1956** the popular movement raised the most fundamental question of the exercise of public power: *What should be the relationship between the state and society?* In point of fact, this was the key question to arise in the course of negotiations with the Government about the activities of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest, about the functions of provincial workers' councils, and about the organisation of a National Workers' Council. Admittedly, the germ of the problem had already been apparent in **1945** in the practices of those national committees that had declared themselves the supreme authorities in their localities, and that had subjected the organs of local administration to their own directives. However this question that caused so many headaches to both party leaders and the Government—the question of who should be responsible to whom, or more generally, what should be the relationship between state and society—had then remained largely restricted to the local level.

However, after **4 November 1956** the Hungarian workers' councils came to assert their claim to take part in the decision-making process concerning all fundamental national and social problems, even to demand the right to exercise control over the organs of the state. In effect what

they were calling for was a complete and thorough revision of the entire practice of government.

In 1956 a radically new phenomenon also presented itself when the working people, in the course of their mass actions, not only gave expression to their desire for the direct exercise of public power but, through the creation of new, popular organs of power, began at the same time *to bring about the transformation of the relations of production and property that constitute the very essence of any social system*,

One point should be emphasised over and over again. None of these developments came about in response to any initiatives or directives from either the party leadership or its 'revisionist' critics, from parties either inside or outside the coalition, from any old or new splinter group, nor as the result of incitement by political adventurers or troublemakers. The appeals by the Communist Party leaders, the personnel changes within this leadership, none of this had any effect whatever—nor did advice from other sources—because the working people *were going their own way*, guided by their bitter and profound experiences of almost an entire decade. It is indeed difficult fully to appreciate what had come over the Hungarian working class who, in 1948, had rapturously celebrated the nationalisation of industry as their own victory, and who, by 1956, could be demanding, as one man, the transfer of state-owned enterprises into communal ownership.

But how could they have acted otherwise? Once they had elected their workers' councils, empowering them to take over the management of their enterprises, to make and execute decisions that lay within the competence of ownership, what else could they have done but go ahead with realising *the transformation of what had so far been state property into genuine communal property*? They did not act in response to initiatives from above, as in Yugoslavia. They did not wait for instructions from the Government, that was changing in composition from day to day. They did not heed the appeals of the Trade Union Council, that had lost its authority and credit anyway. They acted quickly and decisively, once history had confronted them with the questions of what should be the future of the nationalised industries. Should they have left them alone, until some form of 'popular representation' might happen to give them back to the capitalists? Or were they right to take them into their possession, thereby taking the first and decisive step towards the creation of genuine communal property?

Whether it was their simple desires and political instincts that they followed, whether they acted deliberately in full knowledge of the importance of what they were doing, it remains an undeniable fact, *an act of historic significance* by the Hungarian working class, that even before 4 November, at the time of the first, provisional elections of workers' councils, when the waves of anti-socialist feeling were very high, they took

a unanimous stand against the restoration of capitalism and in favour of the creation of a truly socialist system based on ownership by the community. Official history has not been able to find a single factory, a single resolution carried by a single workers' council, that would have supported the restoration of capitalism.

And how else could we interpret the definitive elections to the workers' councils carried out at the end of November and the beginning of December, under the new order of the Kádár regime, than as a further act of faith in the new property relations, under which the ownership of the material factors of production would neither be divorced from labour, from the community of producers—as had been the case under nationalised—nor allowed to stand in opposition to it—as under capitalism?

This was a spontaneous mass action of the Hungarian working class, as has been attested in official reports. We are told that, 'A true ballot of all workers was conducted, the votes were properly counted, in many places records were taken of the whole electoral procedure. . . .' There is also evidence that they represented the same standpoint as the earlier elected councils, for ' . . . the overwhelming majority of those elected to the final councils was made up of the same people who had figured in the provisional councils. The new elections did not change the composition of the workers' councils to any significant extent.'

In 1956 the most numerous group in Hungarian society, the millions of small property owners, also demonstrated by their mass actions that they too wanted a share in the direct exercise of public power, with the aim of establishing and securing their right to *personal ownership based on individual and family labour*. They wanted a social and economic system that would recognise and secure the right to ownership of those factors of production (land, equipment, simple machinery, etc.) which were necessary for their own productive work, but not utilised to exploit the labour of others. In a word, *they sought to restore the unity of individual labour and personal property*.

Working peasants in their hundreds of thousands divided up amongst themselves the collective farms that had been forcibly imposed upon them, or simply abandoned them, leaving them as empty shells. In their eyes, these so-called 'co-operatives' were just state property by another name. The majority of agriculture, however, had remained in the hands of individual proprietors, and they now demanded the immediate repeal of all the burdensome restrictions—the compulsory deliveries of produce to the state at prices hardly covering the costs of production, the central direction and management of crop production, to mention but a few—that shackled their ability to make the best use of their property, to work and produce as they saw fit. These were not merely demands proposed at mass meetings. In many places they simply destroyed the files containing directives affecting each individual smallholder. In 1956, after 4 November,

Peasants' Councils were formed throughout the country. Self-employed craftsmen, small traders, one-man businesses, in towns and villages demanded the right of the small proprietor to own and work his own property. Together with the working peasantry, they made up the majority of the population.

Another significant and politically important difference between **1945** and **1956** can be seen in the relationship of the popular movement to the political parties. In **1945** the factory committees in industry were largely influenced and directed by the two workers' parties and the trade unions. The workers left the nature, timing and methods of transforming the relations of production to the parties and trade unions. By **1956** no trace of this trust remained. The change was tremendous. The workers, or at least the huge majority of them, were unwilling to leave the representation of their interests to the parties. What is more, this mistrust did not apply to the Communist Party alone. It is certainly true that the workers demanded a multi-party system, both before and after 4 November, but there is ample documentation to show that their reason for doing so—, indeed, official history also admits—was their belief that a plurality of parties was the only safeguard against the uncontrolled power of single party rule, before which they had been so powerless. The process of emancipation from the parties gained strength and spread rapidly amongst the workers. A series of resolutions passed by workers' councils laid down their refusal to allow the existence of party organisations within the factories. While these were obviously directed primarily against the now busily re-organising Communist Party—after all, no other party existed any longer—their chief motive must have been their determination to prevent the breaking up of class solidarity. The workers' councils were seen as the embodiment of this unity and solidarity.

We know little about the views of working peasants in **1956** towards the political parties—either the new ones or the old ones. It is, however, a significant fact that after 4 November it was peasants' councils, not political parties, that they began to organise.

The facts and considerations discussed above demonstrate that the essential, though hidden, and fundamental issue of Hungarian democracy, indeed of our whole social development, was and still is the direct participation of working people in the exercise of public power. We have attempted to show—albeit in a somewhat sketchy manner—that what we are involved with is a historical process, in the course of which the working people are striving, with both growing force and consciousness, to reshape the relationship between state and society in a new way. These efforts of hundreds and thousands of people are being fuelled, day by day, by their recurring experiences of how the direction of society and the economy works in a way that is not only irrational, but also goes against their interests. This process is continually pushing forward, and in the course of

its advance it becomes ever clearer that the most fundamental issue is that of the relationship between the exercise of public power and the relations of production and property. In **1956** the working people did not entrust their interests to representation by political parties or parliaments—they set about the tasks of transforming the relations of production and property themselves.

The history of this popular movement for the exercise of public power, of its **1956** episode in particular, raises many important theoretical issues, casts new light on many an old question, and throws up many a new one. Amongst the most important of these issues are those of: the institutional structure of the economy and of society as a whole; centralised power and social self-government; forms of political pluralism in a society based on communal ownership; the relationship between direct democracy and representative democracy, and many others.

We feel that this preliminary discussion has been necessary, for it is only by hindsight that we can form a truer and more complete picture of the earlier period of this popular movement demanding a share of the exercise of public power. Thus our knowledge and experience of **1956** can enable us to see **1945** too in an entirely new light. In particular, we now have a clearer understanding of the conflicts between the popular movement and the Government, and of the part played in them by the political parties. It is also to be hoped that by providing this rough **knowledge** of the wider historical context, we will have made it easier for the reader to appreciate better the contribution of **István Bibó** to our understanding of the fundamental issue of Hungarian democracy.



In **1944-45** the popular movement that followed the collapse of the old regime was characterised by a spontaneous mass ferment, by the birth of an independent political life that was not as yet manipulated by party leaderships. Hundreds of thousands of people could be found taking an active part in the performance of public tasks.² Factory committees, national committees, land reform committees, production committees, and many other similar popular organs were springing up throughout the country to shoulder public duties and responsibilities. This was a national, not just a local movement, although its strength and intensity varied from place to place, depending on how far the people and their standard bearers were willing to take independent action, or how far they allowed themselves to be constrained by respect for authority. While some of these bodies were called into being by government decree, most of them sprang up spontaneously and it was only later that the Government issued orders regulating their activities. But whatever the way they came into being, these popular organs were in every case only the vessel, waiting to be

filled up by the aims and claims of the people. People's hopes and desires for a better, more humane, more just world, reinforced by the belief of their representatives on the committees that the direct, active participation of working people can solve the problems both of their individual lives and of the country, worked together to give life to the many different organs of the popular movement, linking them all up as in one huge electric current.

Wherever the desire for the creation of 'a new world' bubbled up at an intense heat—I am thinking particularly of the part of Eastern Hungary known as *Tiszántúl*—the behaviour of these popular organs was characterised by *revolutionary democracy*. In these places they acted in an independent manner, quickly, decisively, and very much in the interests of their own community. Whenever conflicts arose between government regulations and the interests of the people they represented, they stood up for the people. This spirit was encouraged and strengthened by the prominent role of *popular assemblies*. These were not made up of mindless flocks tamely listening to party hacks, as they would later become. They were forums of lively, spirited debate; deliberative *assemblies* that took decisions and called their representatives to account.

The overriding aim of this popular movement in **1945** was that the popular organs should take over the exercise of public power in towns and villages alike, imposing their direction and control over all the organs of public administration.

How universal was this phenomenon?

If we bear in mind that the use of written records was not the strong suit of these popular committees, and that a large part of the documentation that did exist has probably been lost through a combination of official 'weeding out', frequent moves and general carelessness, we can safely assume that the number of remaining documents is much less than the number of localities where popular organs came to exercise public power. It is also likely that, once a Government had been formed at the end of December **1944**, a good number of these organs yielded without any protest to the official reorganisation of the administrative system. Once the party leaderships joined in the confrontation with the popular organs, seeking to wrest away from them their exercise of power, there were to be many national committees—no doubt already infiltrated by party activists—that would simply accede to the directives of the party leaderships.

The momentum of this popular movement and the strength of its claims to a share in the exercise of power was also attested to in the writings of leading politicians at the time. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Ferenc Erdei, wrote in December **1944** in an article entitled *The Temporary Reorganisation of Public Administration* that

'... the system of self-government has no well-trodden path before it. We have to set out, therefore, on a new, untried path towards popular self-government, in order to build up a new country and a *new, democratic and popular system of public administration*. The work of my Ministry has been made easier because the Hungarian people have *already started out on this path*... throughout the country... national committees have been formed... *organs of self-government based on popular representation* have been created, and the people have elected their delegates to take over the running of public administration in both the towns and the villages.'

In addition to the remarks quoted here, the strength of the popular movement was also indicated by Erdei's comment that the Government had no choice but to 'accept these organs of popular self-government as its starting point, link them up and unify them, and issue general rules to regulate their activities'.³

Jozsef Révai, one of the leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party, also affirmed that this popular movement was 'a more-or-less broad and deep democratic mass movement'. Further, he wrote that '... tremendous ferment and activity has gripped the masses of people. Throughout the country... all sorts of genuine popular organs have sprung up'. He emphasised that the population, even the remnants of the old administration, had recognised the national committees that had come to exercise public functions '... as commanding organs of state power'.⁴

The most telling proof of the strength and social significance of this popular claim for a share in the exercise of power is the fact that the newly established central authority—the coalition government—from the very first moment of its existence turned against the popular movement, and did all in its power to suppress it. Decrees were issued, the Allied Control Commission was approached for help, threats of reprisals were made against the recalcitrant national committees and their members. In the first months of 1945, one of the chief worries of the Government was how it could discipline the national committees; in other words, how it could exclude them from power. Would this have been the case if they had been only local, isolated phenomena—as some of our historians would have us believe?

Ferenc Erdei had been wrong. Within a week of the appearance of his article quoted above, the Government, with the approval of the leaders of the political parties, issued a decree stripping the national committees of their powers of control over public administration.' This marked the beginning of the reconstruction of the old, anti-democratic system of public administration.⁶

How did the national committees, those that were in charge of public affairs, respond? They just carried on running things, giving orders to the local administrative organisations and officials as if the government decree did not exist. The population, the officials too, continued to recognise the

authority of the national committees, and went on obeying their instructions for several months.

The conflict was by now glaringly open. Democracy was being interpreted quite differently 'up above' from the way it was being practised 'down below'—in the recalcitrant committees. Their continuing activity clearly demonstrated that—at least at the local level—they were determined to order the relationship between the state and society in a new way.

The conflict came to a head in regard to two crucial aspects of this many-sided relationship and, even after the publication of the government decree, the recalcitrant national committees insisted on maintaining their powers in two crucial areas. These two basic demands demonstrated once again the exceptional political instinct and understanding of the realities of power that was alive in the national committees.

1. They persisted in their right to appoint local officials, or at least to insist that none should be appointed without their approval. This was not just an expression of their legitimacy as organs of power at the local level, but also, in their eyes, an important condition that power would in the future be exercised in the interests of working people. In the first months of **1945** the democratically minded masses were struggling, in some places quite vigorously, in others less resolutely, with the aim not only to replace the old, reactionary office holders with new persons of good, democratic credentials, but also *to exchange the old administrative system for a new democratic one, in which the democratic power of the working people would be realised in the authority of popular organs over the bodies of public administration*. This was the essence of the 'tremendous ferment' spoken of by József Révai, and which was given expression so clearly and explicitly by one national committee after another.

2. The recalcitrant national committees insisted on their right to continue to exercise control over the organisation and functioning of the police. In the autumn of **1944** the popular organs had set up their own forces of law and order. They had not been able to arm them, but they had been able to choose the most reliable members of the local community to staff and command them. Once the national committees were constituted, they naturally assumed it as their right to direct and control, appoint and dismiss, the members of these forces. The most remarkable feature of their actions was not just the fact that they had set up these new forces of law and order, but that they *worked out and tried to maintain a new relationship between the working people (or their representatives) and the forces of order of the state*. In this way they provided an answer to one of the basic problems of democracy—indeed, of any and every power system.

The governmental decree of 5 January **1945** thus had no effect. The Prime Minister, General Bkla Miklos, in a speech on **18** February, accused the national committees of seeking to overthrow the internal order of the

country. He presented his complaints to the Allied Control Commission and, referring to it, he announced that the rebellious committees would be brought to book with the utmost severity.⁷ He could not, however, count on the police to undertake such drastic action. The police had already shown themselves to be powerless, when attempts had been made to take back land that had been handed out to many thousands of poor peasants.

In consequence, the Prime Minister had a new draft decree drawn up—much more severe than his January one—and submitted it for approval to an inter-party conference. The minutes of this conference are an invaluable document, recording as they do the standpoints of the party leaderships on the fundamental issue of Hungarian democracy.⁸

There is little need to comment on the views of the parties standing for 'law and order'. The leaders of the Smallholders Party fully agreed with the form and content of the decree. It was in full accord with the feelings of the strata of property owners in towns and villages who supported their party. After the uncertainties caused by the war, the occupation, the changed political circumstances, they desired a return to the security of a normal way of life and the restoration of law and order so necessary for untroubled production.

It should be pointed out, however, that in certain parts of Eastern Hungary representatives of the small property owners were themselves to be found in the recalcitrant national committees, taking an active part in running public affairs. They were at one with the representatives of the poorer peasants, and at times it was they who were the leading spirits in the committees. *It is a factor of importance that in this question the dividing line did not run between the parties but within the parties.*

The leadership of the Social Democratic Party also stood on the side of 'order', which meant the 'old order' and rejected the popular demand for a share in the administration of public affairs. In the minutes of the conference we can read: 'The Social Democratic Party approves of all measures aimed at disciplining the national committees, at putting an end to their all too frequent abuses of power'.

How else but in terms of 'abuses' and 'disorder' could we have expected these party leaders, who had felt so at home in the pseudo-parliamentary system of Horthy's counter-revolutionary regime, to have looked on the independent and active search of the working masses for a direct share in power?

And what stand did the Hungarian Communist Party take, considering that, especially in the first half of 1945, it had a much greater influence than any other party of the coalition in re-shaping social and economic relations? Its spokesmen did pay lip service to the valuable political role the national committees were playing in terms of initiatives, supervision, and recommendations. When it came to the essential issue, however, they did not support the demands of the popular movement for a share in

power, but rather the anti-democratic standpoint of the Prime Minister. In their view, only the Government was entitled to exercise executive power, through the blindly obedient, fully subordinate, and materially dependent bureaucracy. They were clearly concerned to sustain and maintain the full structure of centralised state power. The Communist leaders, only recently returned from Moscow, knew very well why.

The Communist Party leaders consistently maintained this position at the interparty conference of 19 March 1945 called to discuss the Prime Minister's draft decree. They approved of the exclusion of the national committees from the exercise of power, the very heart of the matter. However, they wanted to keep in reserve the possibility of exerting mass pressure on the government, and they did not want to see the latter's authority strengthened by allowing it to assume the powers formerly exercised by the national committees. They therefore proposed that instead of the Government issuing a decree, the parties should approach the national committees directly with an appeal for order, the essence of which was to be as follows:

1. It should be categorically established that the national committees are not official organs of power; they must not interfere in public administration; all abuses of this nature must stop. The national committees must not be allowed to set up a second power structure parallel to that of the state.
2. The appeal should emphasise that the national committees are advisory and supervisory bodies (naturally enjoying the rights appropriate to any supervisory body to inspection and scrutiny), and organs for mobilising the people in the fight against reactionary forces.
3. In the appeal the parties should take up a firm stand against any attempt or tendency that might seek to abolish the authority of the national committees, or reduce them to mere complaints' offices.

This masterpiece requires no comment. One has only to look at the third point which is simply a smoke-screen. While the first point would strip the national committees in practice of all real authority, the third point was a sham clarion call against those who might want to put an end to their powers.

How are we to explain the attitude of the Communist leaders returned from Moscow? Why did they turn against the strivings of the working people?

Some answers to these questions are to be found in the records of a number of meetings held by the Hungarian Communist leaders in Moscow towards the end of September 1944. The topic of these meetings was the political guidelines that the Party should follow; amongst others: what position should the Party adopt with regard to the relationship between the future government and a probable popular movement? The already-cited treatise only quotes extracts from the documentation, but these are sufficient to throw some light on our questions.

Do we need national committees, and if so, what for?—this was the title of a well-known article by Rkvai in January 1945. In fact, he had already given his answer to this at the Moscow meetings. In Rkvai's opinion, it was unlikely that the new Hungarian government would be any more democratic than the Bulgarian one, so there would be every need 'to drive it forward'. 'We want to create revolutionary, popular democratic, "rank-and-file" bodies. If a popular upsurge occurs, these bodies should be able to respond to the pressure of the masses'—and exert pressure in their turn on the Government. That should be the role of the 'rank-and-file' bodies (the national committees, factory committees, etc.)—that and nothing else. They would not be indispensable, and they would only be needed for so long as it was necessary to keep up the pressure in order to change the balance of forces within the Government. The practices of the Hungarian Communist Party leaders in later years were to be clear proof of their purpose. Révai had already openly and explicitly formulated this at the Moscow meeting in 1944, in reply to the question as to what should be the standpoint of the Party in respect of the relations between the national committees (i.e. the popular movement) and the central power.

This is a question of the class struggle. What would be best for us? —For these bodies to control the state, or for the state to control them? In which case would the Party have the greater influence? We cannot know the answer in advance.

Let us look a little more closely at this quotation. 'A question of the class struggle'—obviously this refers to the struggle for power, in the historical period of the collapse of the old order and the creation of a new one. 'What would be best for us? —For these bodies to control the state, or for the state to control them?' But just what bodies are 'these'? Whom does Révai mean by 'them', expressing himself in a way that distances him from them? Obviously, he means the national committees, the popular organs that had come into being, representing the working people. But, as against these, who are the 'us' he speaks of. Evidently, the leaders taking part in the Moscow meetings. 'What would be best for us? . . . In which case would the Party have the greater influence?'—this is the yardstick. And, indeed, in 1945 this attitude was put into practice, when it came to disciplining the national committees. This then was what was to be the new 'people's democracy'—a favourite subject of Rkvai's speeches and writings.

Why, however, was it that the Party leadership rejected, from the very first moment, the prospect of power sharing by the national committees in public administration? At the Moscow meeting, Mátyás Rákosi had said: 'We don't want any kind of dual power. This does not mean, however, that the influence of the masses should be completely eliminated.' It may

be assumed that this **statement** took **into** consideration the current international situation, as well as the emerging internal balance of forces, and was aimed towards a normalisation of social life. Nevertheless, it is crystal clear that *they did not favour the establishment in the future of any kind of institutions that might have given scope for the working masses to exercise an independent and active political life*. This did not fit at all into their conception of socialism, which was one that pre-supposed the over-riding, exclusive and uncontrolled power of party and state.

The National Peasant Party—the party of which István Bibó was a member—gave its support to the Communist position. At the inter-party conference however, in distinction from the leaders of the other parties, Ferenc Erdei did point out the other side of the coin. 'In those two areas where abuses by national committees have occurred', he argued,

namely in matters of public administration and the maintenance of public order, it is the urgent duty of the Government to settle matters in a **truly** democratic manner, so that no cases might arise in the future that could not be dealt with by the appropriate bodies themselves.

It is hardly surprising that such a call by the then Minister of Internal Affairs for a 'radically democratic reorganisation' of public administration and public order fell on deaf ears. Both the Communist standard-bearers of 'people's democracy' and the Smallholders' Party leaders with their call for 'genuine democracy' were really engaged in a fierce battle to capture positions of power, and their first consideration was 'What would be best for us' in this power struggle.

Little wonder then, that one month after this inter-party meeting of March 1945, the Government, far from bringing about a 'radically democratic reorganisation' of public administration and public order, stripped the national committees of all their powers.

However, the defeat of the popular movement was not due to the Government's action alone. Their impetus was thwarted, first and foremost, by the opposition and manipulations of the various party headquarters. The party leaderships strengthened their control over local party organisations and party members were commanded to carry out central instructions without fail. Those militant elements who were not prepared to accept this role were relieved of their offices, while the most capable and promising members were raised to new, higher positions. In consequence, the standards and activities of the committees declined. Indeed, the national committees increasingly took on the colouring of coalition politics, losing their popular character and their former links with the population. Soon enough, the national committees degenerated into local platforms for the strife and discord existing at the national level.

How did István Bibó perceive the crisis of Hungarian democracy? His essay of 1945 on this topic (entitled *The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy*) was discussed with shameful superficiality and malice at the time. Even today, it is often misunderstood, even amongst his most ardent followers. This is reason enough to attempt an answer to this question.

Mainly and most importantly, he felt that *the revolutionary transformation*, begun in the first months of 1945, *had stopped in its tracks*. In his view, the direction taken by our public life was imperilling the process of transforming a centuries-old, ossified, feudalistic social structure into a democratic, free commonwealth. This was the ever present worry of István Bibó. The central concern of all his political writings between 1945 and 1948 remained the same: How to give new impetus to the democratic transformation that had come to a halt, how to set it back in motion and bring it to fruition?

Bibo was not very well known even in his own party, let alone acknowledged there. He was not a member of the executive, nor a parliamentary representative. A modest and lonely man, an individual without any mass following, it was his conscience that drove him into public life, into the noisy world of party battle-cries. He was tortured by the fear that, owing to the slowing down of the transformation amid the circumstances created by the occupation, Hungary might miss a unique historical opportunity. In his eyes, 1945 had promised the most momentous change in Hungarian history since 1514, the date of the peasant revolt. He saw it as a matter of life and death for Hungary that the collapse of the old order should be followed by a genuine liberation.

He held that the process of social transformation had come to a standstill because, in his eyes, democracy meant much more than representation of the people, much more than the coming to power of democratic parties, however honest the elections, however well-intentioned and genuinely concerned for the people the parties' leaders might be. He was not alone in his opinion, *but he was the only one at the time to proclaim loudly and clearly that the aim of the process of transformation was the establishment of popular rule*. In his terse and impeccable expression:

Democracy means rule by the people, more precisely a political system in which the people, that is the whole community of ordinary men and women, have the power to choose their leaders, to exercise control over them and, if necessary, to kick them out.⁹

The final point of this statement is the most remarkable one, so characteristic is it of Bibo's political personality and way of thinking. He did not say that the people should have the 'right of recall' over their leaders—political literature generally pinpoints the 'right of recall' as one of the main safeguards of democracy—he said they should be able 'to kick

them out'. He wrote this deliberately, and the distinction is an obvious one. In regard to this safeguarding of the rule of the people, he did not put the emphasis on the formal aspects of the procedure. This does not, of course, mean that he disregarded the importance of regular procedures, but, when it came to the question of democracy, Bibó held one thing more important than anything else—that the people should be fully assured that the power of their leaders resided in popular consent. It was not the legal rules, nor the solemn declaration of a constitution, that was the real proof of a true democracy, but the self-assurance of millions, reinforced by their day-to-day experiences, that gives them the ability and the guts, if need should arise, to kick out those who might threaten their democracy. The history of our present century has proved time and again just how right Bibó was.

Spiritual liberation ' . . . from the psychological oppressions of political power, be this based on divine right, birthright, or any other supernatural "right" ' had a central place in his order of things. Precisely this kind of liberation was needed, he believed, to ensure the permanence of democracy. His political acuteness, and his spirit of revolutionary democracy, found its clearest expression in his belief that only through a revolution could the people cast off their serf-like humility, their unshakeable respect for higher authority. Only in a revolution could the people perceive their own strength, and realise that they had every right—indeed duty—to choose their own leaders and, if need be, to kick them out. No professional revolutionary, however experienced, could have characterised this concept in a more telling way, more tersely, than with the phrase, 'to kick them out'.

István Bibó was right in every sense when he looked to the people's spiritual liberation as the most significant factor for the further development of Hungarian society. Moreover, his ideas soon found their practical realisation in the actions of the popular organs, whenever they assumed public authority, booted out unreliable officials, took over the control of public administration, stood up to the authorities and, if need be, resisted the anti-democratic decrees of the Prime Minister! The historical experience of 1945 was indeed a spiritual liberation for the Hungarian people. This is what Bibó called *the revolution of human dignity*. In his view, this is the only true revolution; one that is not tied down to some timetable of social and economic development, but one that must happen in every country before we can even begin to talk about democracy.

There is much here with which one could argue. But the goal he set for the 'revolution of human dignity' was a clear one—a radical transformation of social and economic relationships, leading to the creation of free communities based on the principle of individual liberty. These communities would, at the same time, serve as the guarantors of individual liberty and free personal development.

This is the great social problem of the present epoch. *What system of production and property relations can serve to assure, instead of denying, the freedom both of the community and of the individual?* Without these freedoms there can be no talk of human dignity—neither in the East, nor in the West. After all, what became of human dignity in the wake of the great, successful revolutions of 1789 and 1917?

A revolution that would 'straighten the stooping backs', that would awaken the people to the recognition of their own power—this is the *leitmotif* of Bibó's political thought. But what chances were there for this in Hungary in the aftermath of the war, when the preconditions of a revolution were missing? The majority of the population was craving for peace and quiet, law and order, a return to normal—not for a revolution. This majority feared the spectre of a proletarian dictatorship, a fear fuelled by the tactical blunders of the Communists, and one which drove even those property owners who were democratically minded, who had accepted the changes of 1945, into common cause with the reactionaries. This growing anti-communism was seen by Bibó as a great danger for democracy, for it drew the dividing line within the democratic camp, when what was needed was to detach from the reactionaries those would-be democrats who had been driven by fear into their arms. This was the main peril, the crisis of the democratic coalition—this increasing polarisation, threatening the renewed advance of the stalled revolution. For the sake of the revolutionary transformation, the coalition had to be maintained, the camp of democracy had to be broadened, if necessary, then even at the price of slowing down the pace of development. This offered the only possibility for saving democracy under the existing circumstances. This was the essence of Bibó's train of thoughts.

What did he suggest? No less than a *historical compromise*, appropriate for the time. Instead of confrontation and showdown—which, regardless of whether it resulted in the victory of the 'majority', or the dictatorship of a minority, could in any event only lead to the defeat of democracy—let the opponents search out some common ground. Let them decide on those areas of social life where the pace of radical change could be resumed, indeed, where it should be accelerated. Let them stake out the areas of consolidation, to put at rest the fears of all those craving for law and order, the hesitant 'slowcoach democrats' of the propertied classes, and in this way win their support for a lasting co-operation. *Bibó called this compromise a limited and planned revolution.*

Let us stop here for a moment, for we have now come face to face with one very characteristic trait of Bibó's personality and political thinking. How could both an approval of revolution, and a far-reaching willingness to compromise, exist side by side in his thinking? In fact, how was he able to take up such a dual stance both in 1945 and in 1956 in his actual political behaviour?

Bib6 was a revolutionary democrat. He was not afraid of radical transformation—in fact, he desired it. Of course, what he desired was the revolution of the majority, the great advance of spiritual liberation. At the centre of his revolution stood mankind, the freedom and dignity of the common man, and the guarantee of this—the rule of the people. He had no time for a revolution of the minority—especially of a tiny minority—knowing that this would lead to dictatorship, give birth to fear and indifference, in the end destroy the true character of the people.

His revolution might be delayed, but after all its timing was not crucial for him, he would not abandon it. He did not live in an ivory tower of ideas. He was quite prepared to come down and tackle the practical realities of the world as it was. He tried to explore ways of realising the promotion of both individual and communal freedom under existing conditions, and despite the very unfavourable internal and external circumstances. If one could not reach the goal at a single bound, then one would have to try and approach it step by step.

With the experience of several decades, we cannot help but marvel at the accuracy of István Bibó in identifying precisely those areas of social life where radical changes would have been most decisive for the progress of democracy.

He pointed out, first of all, two closely connected problem areas of public affairs—public administration and self-government. In his eyes, these were the most critical points of democratic development, because he believed that,

a genuine, firmly based democracy can only come into existence for the Hungarian people, when they come to experience the collapse of the old power structure and when they begin to take the direction of their own affairs into their own hands.¹¹

His aim was no less than the transformation of the hitherto domineering public administration into '... a machinery serving the **people**'.¹¹ In actual fact, this was—and still is—the cardinal issue for democratic transformation in Hungary. In this respect, Bib6 faithfully put forward and represented the most universal aim of the popular movement.

His advocacy of this popular claim for a share in the exercise of power also included the view that only genuine, local self-government could ensure that, 'the broad masses of the Hungarian people... can take possession—directly and on the spot—of the most immediate administrative structures closely affecting their lives'. From his experiences of two long years as the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' department controlling public administration, from 1945 to 1947, he concluded that,

Genuine democratic change only occurred in those places where the national committees, formed from political parties and other organisations, brought the

ablest people of the locality to the fore, and faced up squarely to the concrete problems of handling public affairs. . . successfully tackling and performing the direct and day to day tasks of public administration. It was within this framework that a genuine political education was gained.¹²

With an eye to the future, he summed up the most important lesson of the popular movement as follows:

The real solution to the problem will only be attained if we work, with all our strength, for a separation between the functions of democratic community leadership and administrative expertise, subordinating the administrative officials to the elected leaders of the community.¹³

Truly, this is where rule by the people begins, and this is what the national committees and other popular bodies brought about in hundreds if not thousands of localities.

In 1945 these demands of the popular movement for a share in the exercise of public power did not, by and large, overstep the limits of a localised assertion of executive power. But there were, however, some committees that did seek to extend their exercise of power over larger administrative areas. Several documents also verify the fact that a number of national committees even attempted to check the central power of the state—refusing to apply central government regulations that they considered anti-democratic, or even amending such regulations to suit their own purposes. These moves were largely unorganised and un-coordinated, but they certainly represented attempts to go beyond a purely local exercise of power.

How are we to explain Bibb's failure to pay attention to these developments which were so significant for the future, and which were to reappear in 1956 no longer as isolated instances, as merely embryonic forms, but as ones affecting the entire Hungarian society, and in particular the working class? We can only think that it was because the parties of the coalition would have unanimously rejected any radical reform of the way society was run, and so such developments could not find any place in Bibb's conception of a 'planned' and 'limited' revolution.

It is, however, more difficult to understand why Bibb did not discuss these demands for the self-government of society in his writings of 1956 and 1957.

Bibb's remarkable foresight was also shown in his suggestions for further safeguards to ensure a truly democratic future. He urged the radical reform of public education, so as to replace the servile subjects of the past with independently thinking new generations. In the economy, he favoured the development of new, freely-formed associations, worthy of free people, and, in accord with the leaders of his own party, he felt that co-operatives

provided the most suitable form for such bodies. His insights—*mutatis mutandis*—are still valid today.

Translated by Julian Schöflin

NOTES

János Molnár, *A Nagybudapesti Központi Munkástanács* (The Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest), Budapest, 1969, pp. 90-91. János Molnár tries to explain away the election results by saying that 'the campaign was conducted under great moral pressure, demagoguery, threats and intimidation', and that the workers were afraid and confused. Against this argument stand the facts that the ballots were, as a rule, secret ones, and the police were at the time in the course of arresting many leaders of the workers' councils.

The findings of this essay, in respect of the popular movement of 1945, are analysed and documented in more detail in the first chapter of the author's *Demokratikus földreform Magyarországon 1945-1947* (Democratic Land Reform in Hungary: 1945-1947), Budapest, 1969. On the national committees, a wealth of data can be found in Béla Balázs, *Népmozgalom és nemzeti bizottságok: 1945-1946* (The Popular Movement and the National Committees: 1945-1946).

3. *Néplap* (People's Journal), Debrecen, 31 December 1944.

4. József Révai: *A magyar népi demokrácia jellege* (The Character of the Hungarian People's Democracy); *A népi demokrácia kérdései* (The Problems of People's Democracy); *Das neue demokratische Ungarn* (New Democratic Hungary).

Government Decree No. 14119451, *Magyar Közlöny* (The Hungarian official gazette), 5 January 1945.

6. Government Decree No. 15/1945/.

7. *Népszava* (People's Voice), Debrecen, 21 February 1945.

8. Archives of the Institute for the Study of the Communist Party's History, 2/19-16. The references are from Sándor Rákosi and Bálint Szabo, 'A pártok állásfoglalása a nemzeti bizottságok kérdésében 1945 elején—Adatok' (The standpoints of the parties towards the question of the national committees at the beginning of 1945—Supplementary Data), in *Párttörténeti Közlemények* (Review of Party History), Budapest, 1967, No. 1.

István Bibó, 'A magyar demokrácia válsága' (The crisis of Hungarian democracy), in *Válóság* (Reality), Budapest, 1945, Nos. 2-4.

10. István Bibó, 'A koalíció egyensúlya és az önkormányzati választások' (The balance of forces in the coalition and the elections for self-government), in *Válasz* (Reply), Budapest, 1946, No. 2.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*