HUNGARY: FROM CALM TO REVOLT

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EVEN if we assume the obvious, namely that the insurrection in Hungary was immediately motivated by previous developments in Poland, our assumption still begs the question. How could the Hungarian people muster such a valiant spirit of defiance in the face of Russian tanks, artillery fire and aerial bombing overnight, after the long years which must have appeared to the impartial observer as inglorious submission? After all, there *was* an active resistance in Poland in 1945-46 and even General Mihailovitch managed to continue for a while his resistance against Tito in the Yugoslavian mountains. Czechoslovakia, although by peaceful means, maintained her partly Western orientation until the beginning of 1948.

During all these years between 1945 and 1948 the Magyars appeared docilely to accept their submergence behind the iron curtain, the open Communist flouting of the anti-Communist popular vote at the General Elections in 1945 and 1947, Rákosi's 'salami tactics' to reduce the Smallholder Party's parliamentary majority, the liquidation of the Ferenc Nagy Government, the imprisonment of the Protestant Bishop Ordass and Cardinal Mindszenty.

However profound the impact of the Polish developments on Hungary may have been, particularly in view of the centuries-old Hungaro-Polish sentimental attachment, could the news from Warsaw have changed the national character of the Magyars in a matter of a few hours? Of course not! If we seek to explain the contrast between the Hungarian attitude before and after October 23, 1956, we must go back a few years in history to show that Hungary's loss of independence came about with a slow graduality which precluded any spontaneous resistance in the past.

In 1941 the Hungarian Government led by László Bárdossy declared war on Russia more under German pressure than by genuine conviction. However, as the months elapsed, Bárdossy grew fonder and fonder of the martial decision he had originally taken under duress. The Regent, Admiral Horthy, though neither an intellectual nor a man of democratic principles, was realistic

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and commonsensical and was quick to realize when the trend began to turn against the Axis Powers. In 1942 he replaced Bárdossy by Miklós Kállay, a man whose realistic outlook on politics was similar to his own.[1] Although Kállay knew that the war could only end in disaster for Hungary, he had for months to bide his time and pretend to continue the policy of belligerence inherited from his predecessor.

When, after one year in office, Kállay received the news of Mussolini's fall in Italy, he felt that it was time for him to act. Even those who suspect that his ultimate end was to save the world for the Magyar ruling classes of whom he was a characteristic representative, cannot deny that his plan had vision and could in the event of success have saved the Europe of our childhood.

His idea was to form a bloc of the countries sandwiched between Germany and Russia who all had reasons to fear both of the giants. This bloc would have embraced pro-Axis belligerents, Italy, Hungary and Finland, perhaps Bulgaria, but would have sought to include also the still neutral Turkey and would have attempted to make contact with Poland through her government in exile.[2] Such a bloc, so Kállay hoped, could have brought sufficient pressure on both sides of the fronts to respect the independence of Eastern Europe and even pave the way to a negotiated overall peace settlement.

However Kállay, in the pursuit of his imaginative project, failed to overcome even the first, seemingly easiest, hurdle: the distrust of the Badoglio government in Italy. When, on Kállay's instructions, the Hungarian Ambassador in Rome, Baron Apor, visited Signor Guariglia, the new Italian Foreign Minister, the latter was non-committal and evasive.

When Apor suggested that Italy and Hungary should sue together for an armistice, all that he could extract from Guariglia was a vague promise that, should such a step be considered by Italy one day—which was almost out of the question anyway—Hungary would be included. A promise which fell short from enabling Kállay to proceed with his plans, and which was not to be kept, anyway.

1 Horthy: *Ein Leben für Ungarn.*
Anthony Ullein-Reviczky: *Guerre allemande, paix russe.*
2 Kállay: *Hungarian Premier.*

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In September 1943 Italy concluded an armistice on her own, her traditional '*sacro egoismo*' leaving no room for any consideration of her former allies, and in March, 1944 Hungary had to pay the penalty for the failure of the 'Kállay Plan'. Having lost his confidence in Horthy and Kállay, Hitler—no longer restrained by Mussolini's pro-Hungarian sentiments—occupied the country and forced the Regent to appoint an unreservedly pro-German cabinet.

For obvious reasons, the German occupation could not be resisted in those days. Both the Hungarian ruling classes and the majority of the people considered a German occupation the lesser evil compared with an impending Russian occupation. At that time they still hoped against hope that this lesser evil could be offset against the incidence of the greater one. This was a typical instance of 'once bitten twice shy': in 1919 Hungary had endured a hundred bitter days of Communist rule, witnessing the excesses of early Communism without those later-day achievements which might have partially redeemed those initial excesses, as was to be the case in Russia.

However, Hungarian self-respect suffered gravely by the loss of national sovereignty even to the German ally. In spite of the reassurances from the Hungarian extreme Right, there was a mounting suspicion among the people that they were no longer fighting for an independent Hungary, but were merely engaged in an action to protect the German rearguard against the advancing Russians.

This suspicion became a certainty in many a Magyar heart when in October 15, 1944 Admiral Horthy, after his abortive attempt for an armistice, was replaced with German help by the leader of the Hungarian National Socialist Movement, Ferenc Szálasi. Some Magyars even began to await the Russians as liberators. Acts of sabotage became more frequent.[3] Only during the siege of Budapest, where Hungarian soldiers were fighting beside their German comrades for fifty-two days, did Hungarians display their traditional military valour.

The German occupation authorities and the Szálasi government facilitated in the long run the Russian seizure of the country by ordering young men of military age and encouraging others to retreat to the West with the withdrawing German and Hungarian

3 cf. General Hans Friessner: *Verratene Schlachten.*

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forces. In the political vacuum that resulted by the departure of the most vocal Right-wing elements in the country, the Russians and their not too numerous Hungarian supporters could create—by cleverly playing on the extant anti-German, so called 'Kurucz', traditions of the Magyars—an artificial Left-of-Centre political climate, which favoured a gradual transformation towards Communism.

The systematic emphasis laid by the new rulers on the undoubted excesses committed by pro-Nazi Hungarians particularly against Jews during the months of German occupation as well as the 'revelations' at the effectively manipulated show-trials helped to generate that bad popular conscience which is so essential in making a people submissive.

The 'keep-to-the-Left' trend of those who occupied the ministries in the wake of the conquering Soviet Army first in Debrecen—Hungary's third largest city—then in Budapest, was furthered in the early post-war period by contemporary developments in the West. The Communist ascendency at the French General Elections, the resounding Socialist victory in Britain under the watchword of the 'Left understanding the Left', the 'Henry Wallace fever'—that preceded the 'Joe McCarthy fever'—in the United States, all these contributed to the general impression that, as a Hungarian journalist expressed it in those days, 'one day the whole world would be on the Left'. Many genuine Hungarian patriots, irked by the knowledge that their country had fought on the wrong side in World War II because of her backward domestic conditions, were anxious to catch up with the times regarding social progress. And, in those days, the Communists still managed to hold the monopoly of social progress in the eyes of many.[4]

The part played by the Jews who had survived the horrors of Nazi persecution in concentration camps, in the various underground movements or in hiding places should not be exaggerated, nor should it be ignored. While they could certainly not have come to such a temporary prominence without the Russian occupation, they did, by some of their actions, abet Communist ends during those crucial years. Embittered by their terrible memories, they saw in the Russians their liberators and some of them managed in their painstricken minds to improvise a syn-

4 Michael Burn in *Midnight Diary* gives a true picture of 1945-47 Budapest. The characters of the novel are fictitious, but the background is realistic.

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thesis between political radicalism and their ancient faith in an 'avenging God'.[5]

When many of the several hundred thousand Right-wing Hungarians who had escaped or retreated in the ranks of the armed forces to Germany, returned to Hungary after the end of the hostilities, they found an already established new government there. They were, therefore, compelled to adjust themselves to the radical changes in the political constellation of their motherland, brought about during their comparatively brief absence abroad.

All these factors contributed to the crystallization of a Leftward political atmosphere, replacing the former Right-wing mentality. Mátyás Rákosi—whom the always sarcastically minded Budapest gave, with an allusion to his egg-bald head, the dubiously affectionate nickname of 'the little shaggy'—became a central figure, similar to Admiral Horthy in the *ancien régime*. His position appeared particularly unshakable when, in 1952, he followed the example of his master Stalin in combining in his person the offices of the First Party Secretary and the Prime Minister.

Economic blunders, religious persecutions, the frequent settling of private scores by political means, the arbitrary methods of implementing policy by the new masters soon dispelled the early illusions and led to growing bitterness among the broad masses of the population. The sufferings and privations they had to endure dissolved in the souls of the people the remainder of any sense of guilt for errors in the past.[6] The long years of cold war, studded by local hot wars, between East and West blurred the mirage of a united Left-wing world and thus enabled the old historic forces to reassert themselves after their temporary post-1945 paralysis.

However, nothing did so much to harm the authority of the Communist régime, in Hungary or elsewhere, as the ideological and political insecurity that followed Stalin's death and Beria's execution. The concessions of the first Imre Nagy government in 1953-55 did not go far enough to appease the anti-Communists, but they were sufficient to confound the true Communist stalwarts. The replacement of Imre Nagy by another Rákosi stooge, András Hegedüs, the revoking of Imre Nagy's liberalization measures and his condemnation as a 'Right-wing deviationist'

5 Aladár Kovács: *A Mindszenty Per Árnyékában.* ('In the Shadow of the Mindszenty Trial.')
6 Dezsö Sulyok: *Magyar Tragédia.* ('Hungarian Tragedy'.)

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simply added to the confusion. The chaos and bewilderment in the minds of the Communist ruling minority of Hungary became complete after the posthumous denunciations and exonerations which followed the twentieth Party Congress.

Before that, Communists and fellow-travellers in Hungary believed that Communism, while depriving them of freedom, was at least giving them comparative security in its place. Now they saw their stable universe exploded and had to discover that even the most docile observance of the Party-line could not warrant them a permanent security, since the Party-line itself proved to be subject to retrospective criticism.

This was the point where all Communists, fellow-travellers and reluctant 'compliers' felt themselves deceived. While in the West people basked in the sunshine of the Geneva spirit that produced the 'thaw', those in the East had to face a harsh new reality: they had neither freedom nor security any longer.

Communists and fellow-travellers took the obvious course in response to the new challenge. Public figures, particularly among the intellectuals, with their muzzles partially removed, hurried to the platforms and used the limited freedom they had been granted to ask for more freedom. In their harangues they aired, together with their genuine grievances, further demands calculated to ingratiate them with the non-Communist majority, the potential source of power in the 'newer course' that might follow the 'new course'.

The criticisms in the press and in public speeches became loudest in Poland and in Hungary, the two countries with the longest tradition in preserving intellectual independence in the face of enforced political subservience to foreign powers. Managers of nationalised industries, collective farms, local Communist party secretaries, personalities who in the Stalin era were mentioned only in a tone of deference, had to endure often cruelly sharp verbal castigations.

First only timidly, later more openly, even the pillar of the régime, the police, had to share in this climate of public criticism. In Hungary, in the middle of 1956, no less a person than Zoltán Vas, the country's 'number two' economic expert (Ernö Gerö, expelled by patriots during the October uprising, used to be 'number one'), brought up the subject of the dreaded early-morning 'knocks on the door' by the agents of the political police. László

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Hay, the premier playwright of the régime, although himself a man without religious convictions, criticized on another occasion administrative interference with religious affairs. The 'Petöfi Circle' of Hungarian writers became the official clearing-centre of anti-governmental grievances.

The waves of criticism, tolerated and, up to a point, even encouraged by the régime in the name of the 'new course', emboldened the opponents of Communism and bewildered its staunchest supporters. As the new freedom to criticize cut both ways, those who had been castigated by the press hit back by denouncing the writers and the newspapermen. The exchange of exacerbated denunciations and the emergence of long-repressed passions filled public life, not with the expected relief, but with rising anger, general confusion and mounting tension.

A well-organized totalitarian state can survive a popular discontent, but even a totalitarian state cannot be left unshaken by the growing sense of insecurity and the ensuing disaffection among the ruling *élite*. Both in Poland and in Hungary the upheaval had begun among the Communists themselves, and it was only in the later stages that it spread among the people at large, particularly in Hungary.

The revolt in Poland, an operation of limited objective, was confined to alleviate the excesses of Russian occupation. In Hungary on the other hand, once the Polish spark touched off the forest fire there, the uprising soon exceeded the demands for a more national Communism and, as far as the majority of the rebels were concerned, demanded a complete break with Communist principles and practices.

As after the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, it was in Szeged, the second largest city of Hungary, that the movement against Communism started. Szeged is a typical provincial city, in the middle of an agricultural countryside, inhabited by stolid, matter-of-fact farmers, not by starry-eyed political firebrands. It was not lofty emotion but a sober appraisal of the situation that made them realize, in 1919 as well as in 1956, that Communism in Hungary, as a genuine way of life, had reached bankruptcy.

Once the uprising started, not only the insecurity deriving from the post-Stalin liberalization but even the results of the former Stalinist educational system turned against the Com-

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munists themselves. Young people, even children, who had undergone a partisan-training knew how to destroy Russian tanks with 'Molotov cocktails'. Hungarian girls, whom the Communist way of life changed into hardened amazons, applied their fighting ability against their erstwhile tutors in toughness. Working-class self-consciousness, enhanced by years of Marxist propaganda seminaries, made it easier to organize anti-Russian and anti-Communist strikes.

Where Miklós Kállay and the Hungarian ruling classes had failed in 1943, the Hungarian people succeeded in 1956: in putting Hungary into the focus of world politics. Indeed, it was for the second time in our life-span that Hungary tried to emerge ahead into the future: into the much-coveted *post*-Communist world. In 1919 it was the 'white terror' of the counter-revolutionaries which smothered these efforts and forced back upon the nation the empty shell of the old society, spiritually long defunct. In 1956 it was the 'red terror' of the Soviet Army that prevented the Magyars from working out their own salvation after their bitter experiences in revolution and reaction, Fascism and Communism, German and Russian occupation.

Hungary revived after the devastating Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, survived 150 years of Turkish, another 150 years of Austrian domination. The inherent vitality of the people has thus been established beyond doubt. It is, however, impossible to forecast the future today, when even our knowledge of the present is so vague.

NOTICE

The series of articles, 'A Catechism for Adults', by Ian Hislop, O.P., which appeared in this review in 1955 and 1956, has now been published in book form by Blackfriars Publications at the price of 5s.

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