INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Forty Years On*

What happened in Hungary in 1956? Here is a fairly typical brief Western summary, from the Columbia Encyclopedia:

> On Oct. 23.1956, a popular anti-Communist revolution, centered in Budapest, broke out in Hungary. A new coalition government under Imre Nagy declared Hungary neutral, withdrew it from the Warsaw Treaty, and appealed to the UN for aid. However, János Kádár, one of Nagy's ministers, formed a counter-government and asked the USSR for military support. In severe and brutal fighting, Soviet forces suppressed the revolution. Nagy and some of his ministers were abducted and were later executed. Some 190,000 refugees fled the country. Kádár became premier and sought to win popular support for Communist rule.

In Hungary itself, the history of the 1956 revolution was obliterated or traduced for more than thirty years, while János Kádár progressed from Soviet quisling to domestic father figure and the West's favorite "liberal" communist. Yet through all those years, Kádár himself seems to have been haunted and driven by the memory of the comrades he had betrayed and, finally, condemned to death. Imre Nagy was his Banquo—and he was always Macbeth.

A part of the true history was written abroad. Another part was gradually rediscovered by independent historians and oppositional writers inside Hungary in the 1980s, interviewing survivors, publishing suppressed writings, and drawing their own conclusions. Then, in June 1989, Imre Nagy and his closest associates were ceremonially reburied. Beside the coffins of the leaders lying in state on Heroes' Square, there lay a symbolic sixth coffin of the Unknown Insurgent. This was the great symbolic turning point in Hungary's transition from communism to democracy. Banquo's ghost was enthroned.

In a free Hungary, the true history of 1956 could surely at last be revealed. A whole institute was established for this single purpose: the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Archives were opened. Survivors could now talk freely. Young historians set to work. The 1956 Institute produced a new short history of the revolution, which became the Hungarian school textbook.[1]

With the end of communism elsewhere, more evidence also emerged from the Soviet Union, from Yugoslavia, even from China. Not all the evidence, of course, but more. Meanwhile, American, British, French, and other Western official documents became available under the "thirty-year rule." Some, perhaps the most interesting, remained classified, but scholars pressed for further access and, in the United States, used the Freedom of Information Act to demand it.

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Now, forty years on, scholars and survivors assemble in the handsome rooms of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, its high windows looking across the Danube from naughty Pest to haughty Buda. Inside, it looks like just another academic conference.[2] We might be in London, at a confer-

* This essay was written immediately after a conference organized in 1996 by the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in Budapest and the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution. It is reprinted here, with the kind permission of the author, exactly as it appears in *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches, and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s,* (New York: Random House, 1999).

[1] The excellent English-language edition is György Litván, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt, and Repression, 1953–1963*, ed. and trans. János M. Bak and Lyman H. Legters (London: Longman, 1996).

[2] Entitled "Hungary and the World 1956: The New Archival Evidence," the conference was organized by the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in Budapest, and the National Security Archive and the Cold War International History Project, both of Washington. D.C.

ence about the Suez crisis that so fatefully coincided with the Hungarian revolution. This forty-year moment is an interesting one even in more normal countries: the first and generally the last occasion when reasonably digested findings from the archives can be confronted with the reasonably coherent memories of surviving participants. Thirty years after the event, most of the archives are still closed; fifty years on, most of the participants are no longer with us. Yet in Budapest, the witnesses have survived not just, say, too many good dinners at the Carlton Club in London but a death sentence commuted at the last minute to fourteen years in prison. So the occasion is not ordinary at all.

Being tested here is the central proposition of modern historical writing since Ranke: that with the passage of time we know more about the past. This is supposed to be the case because we have greater distance from the past: because we are (supposedly) more impartial: because we can see the longer-term consequences and therefore the larger historical "meaning" of the events in question: and, above all, because the documents are now available. The subtitle of this conference is "The New Archival Evidence." Following Ranke, we should now learn "how it really was." But do we, can we?

In important ways, we certainly learn more. For example, here, from the Soviet archives, are the notes made by V. N. Malin, head of the General Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, on the Soviet leaders' hectic debates in the Party Presidium.[3] We see them dithering and agonizing in the days after the outbreak of the revolution on 23 October: "C[omra]de Khrushchev [says] . . . the matter is becoming more complicated .... The workers are supporting the uprising." And, later, "The English and French are in a real mess in Egypt. We shouldn't get caught in the same company." And their meetings with Chairman Mao's emissaries on 30 October. "Cde. Khrushchev . . . there are two paths. A military path . . . one of occupation. A peaceful path . . . the withdrawal of troops, negotiations."

So might it really have happened differently? What Gorbachev did in 1989, done by Khrushchev in 1956? These documents warn us against what the French philosopher Henri Bergson called "the illusions of retrospective determinism"—against the conviction, so hard to resist, that what actually happened had to happen. For years, most of us have lived with the assumption that the Soviet Union could never have tolerated what was happening in Hungary—otherwise, it would not have been the Soviet Union. But Soviet leaders plainly did not know that at the time. What would have happened if . . .?

The openness did not last long. On 31 October, Malin records Khrushchev saying. "We should re-examine our assessment and should not withdraw our troops from Hungary and Budapest. We should take the initiative in restoring order in Hungary." What factors were decisive? How important, for example, were concerns about the unity of the international communist movement, with the Italian communist leader Palmiro Togliatti and, finally, also Chairman Mao urging the "restoration of order?" What difference was made by the assurance given by John Foster Dulles that "We do not look upon these nations as potential military allies?" What was the impact of Suez? "If we depart from Hungary," Khrushchev goes on, "it will give a great boost to the Americans, English, and French—the imperialists. They will perceive it as weakness on our part and will go on to the offensive . . . To Egypt they will then add Hungary."

"Agreed: Cdes. Zhukov, Bulganin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Saburov"—and behind this sentence the Russian historian Vyacheslav Sereda hears a sigh of relief. The notes continue, "We should create a Provisional Revol. Govt (headed by Kádár)." But then, incredibly, "If Nagy agrees, bring him in as dep. premier."

Another area of old controversy and new discoveries is the role of Radio Free Europe (RFE), the American-run radio station, which broadcast in all the languages of Eastern Europe. Here we have a hitherto unpublished memorandum from William Griffith, then political adviser to RFE.[4]

[3] The Malin notes are translated and expertly annotated by Mark Kramer, a Harvard specialist on Soviet-Eastern European relations, in a compendium of declassified documents prepared for the conference by the 1956 Institute and the National Security Archive. A larger collection of documents is due to be published by Central European University Press.

[4] The memorandum is included in ibid.

Dated 5 December 1956, it reviews the Hungarian output of RFE and concludes that there were important "policy violations" by the Hungarian radio journalists involved. One program on 28 October gave detailed instructions to Hungarian soldiers on the conduct of partisan warfare. "In the Western capitals," a commentary on 4 November declared, "a practical manifestation of Western sympathy is expected at any hour." Griffith's own conclusion in December 1956 is that the Hungarian service did not *incite* the revolution and "(with one exception) made no *direct* promise or commitment of Western or UN military support or intervention. Its broadcasts may well, however, have encouraged Hungarians to have false hopes in this respect; they certainly did little or nothing to contradict them."

Now William Griffith, today a distinguished professor emeritus of political science at MIT, is on the platform, together with other surviving participants. He makes essentially the same argument that he did forty years ago. But a journalist who then worked for RFE's Hungarian service angrily suggests that the Hungarian journalists are being scapegoated. They were only following American policy guidance, which, in particular, urged criticism of the communist Imre Nagy and support for the militantly anticommunist Cardinal József Mindszenty. An American working in RFE at the time jumps up to support him. He remembers the discussions in the newsroom and quotes from the policy guidance given at the time by Griffith, who was, however, himself subject to policy guidance from New York. An old Hungarian, identifying himself as a listener to Radio Free Europe, emotionally declares that it was to blame for the deaths of thousands of Hungarian youngsters.

Pale-faced, her voice trembling, Mária Wittner, one of the street fighters who paid for her part in the revolution with more than fourteen years in prison, reads out extracts from RFE broadcasts in Hungarian. The interpreter gives us some idea of the fiery language: "The tanks come in . . . invited by the bloody-handed Imre Nagy." (Basing their judgments too much on official Hungarian radio broadcasts, RFE initially thought Nagy was co-responsible for the first intervention by Soviet troops.) Or, again, "Where are the traitors . . . who are the murderers? Imre Nagy and his government . . . Only Cardinal Mindszenty has spoken out fearlessly . . . Imre Nagy is a base Muscovite." But afterward there is some confusion. Are these quotations from RFE's own broadcasts or from Hungarian radio stations taken over by the insurgents—the "freedom stations"—some of whose programs RFE rebroadcast? Jan Nowak, then head of RFE's Polish service, draws the important contrast with Poland, where both the freshly released Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński from inside and RFE from outside immediately and firmly backed Władysław Gomułka, the Polish Nagy.

After this dramatic confrontation of documents and memories, of written and oral history, we can see the historical picture more clearly. With the best of intentions on all sides, and quite understandably, in a confused and drastic situation, which changed literally minute by minute, both Hungarians and Americans at RFE got it wrong. Not all of them and not all the time, of course. But in the crucial days of late October, their broadcasts attacked Imre Nagy (while the Polish service was supporting Gomułka), and some encouraged armed resistance, with broad hints of imminent Western aid that, in fact, the United States (let alone the Suez-embroiled British and French) had no intention of giving. We can never know what difference this made to the course of events; it probably made little or none to the final result. That does not diminish the moral responsibility.

Here, then, are two cases which seem to justify the implicit, neo-Rankean assumption: that with the passing of time and careful study of the documents we know more about what really happened. Yet this is, on a moment's reflection, a very odd assumption. It was not shared by historians for more than two thousand years before Ranke. And it is not one we usually make in everyday life. Our rather reasonable everyday assumption is that the closer you are to an event, in both time and place, the more you are likely to know about it. "Well," we say, "of course you'd know better, because you were there."

The fact is that so much of history with a small *h*—most of it, in fact—is simply lost. To be sure, in some respects we do know more after forty years; but in others we know less. This is particularly true of times of crisis and rapid change, and above all of wars and revolutions. Tolstoy

reminds us in *War and Peace* of the mystery at the heart of battles. So also with revolutions. Even now—especially now—do we really know how and why it came to the storming of the Bastille?

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 is an event of that kind—perhaps the last in Europe with the popular, violent, and genuinely spontaneous character that we still associate with the word *revolution*. All subsequent European revolutions—Czechoslovakia 1968, Portugal 1974, Poland 1980–1981, the many-in-one of 1989—have to be qualified with an additional adjective: "interrupted," "self-limiting," "peaceful," "velvet," "negotiated." For that reason, and because of the subsequent decades of political repression and historical falsification, there is a part of its history that is virtually impossible to recover. It may also be the most important part. It concerns, for example, the experience of the mainly young men and women who took up arms on 23 or 24 October 1956: the workers, students, street-fighting kids who, after all, actually made this a revolution. Without them, it might have remained a high-level political crisis, an attempt at radical reform, an affair largely of the party and the intelligentsia, with the people playing only a supporting role. Why did they act as they did? What was it like for them? What did they hope to achieve? What kept them fighting? What did they think of in the moment before they died?

I read the contemporary reports, watch the newsreels, look at the black-and-white photographs of those smiling boys and girls amid the broken glass, so like the photos of the Warsaw Rising in 1944. I think of Yeats: "a terrible beauty is born." Then I look at some of the meticulous reconstructions of the street fighting by Hungarian historians, using long interviews with survivors. I talk with Mária Wittner, described to me by another survivor as the revolution's Joan of Arc. It is a deeply moving conversation. But even she cannot really explain to me how, as a nineteen-year-old girl from a convent school, she came to pick up that ammunition belt and start reloading the guns for the boys on the roof, shooting back at the guards of the Budapest radio station on 23 October. She talks of "something in the air," of the "vibrations." But the filters of retrospection are too strong.

She wants to speak for those who can no longer speak: her dead comrades, the unknown insurgents. Much of her life since 1989 has been devoted to that purpose. Yet their experience is lost, irrevocably. We don't know, we will never know, what it was really like at the eye of the storm. Beside history regained, there is history lost. In history, too, there is always a sixth coffin.

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The other thing that we are supposed to know more about is the consequences, and hence the larger "meaning," of the event. For this we plainly have to consider the alternatives. Purely hypothetical counterfactuals can be fun and illuminating too, but more important are the alternatives that were considered seriously at the time. As we have found from the documents, major alternatives were considered—for example, by Khrushchev. What if the advice from Togliatti, Tito, and Mao bad been different? What if American policy had been clearer, one way or the other? What if the British and French had not launched the Suez adventure at exactly the same time? Might the Soviet leadership then at least have tried the second path—withdrawal, negotiations—a little longer and more seriously?

But what would have been the impact of that on Poland? For if the Hungarian revolution started with a demonstration beneath the statue of the Polish General Bem, who himself had been a hero of the Hungarian revolution of 1848–1849, the Polish October was hugely influenced by what happened in Hungary. Khrushchev's "peaceful path" in Hungary would surely have encouraged the Poles to ask for the same or more. If the Soviet Union might just have been prepared to countenance an Austrian status for Hungary—in which, after all, even Stalin had proposed only a fifty-fifty split with the West, in his famous "percentages agreement" with Churchill—it was another thing to countenance that for Poland.[5] This, in turn, would have meant countenancing it for Germany—the larger, Western part of which was already in NATO.

Or take another if: What if Hungary had stopped at radical reform, rather than revolution,

[5] See my review essay, "From World War to Cold War," *The New York Review of Books,* June 11, 1987.

as the reform communists around Imre Nagy would have wished, and as Poland did? What might have happened then? Well, look what happened in Poland, where the hopes invested in Gomułka in 1956 were progressively and comprehensively disappointed. Is there any reason to believe that the same would not have happened in Hungary?

Orwell once remarked that "All revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure." The consequences appear different at different times, and some emerge only decades later. To describe 1956 as "the victory of a defeat," as the exiled Hungarian historian Miklós Molnár did in his book of 1968, was not merely romantic hyperbole and wishful thinking.[6] Perhaps the simplest and most direct consequence is one that could be seen immediately but has endured. This is quite simply the sympathy and positive feeling toward Hungary on the part of people around the world who either had hardly noticed its existence before or had had a rather negative image of the country, seeing it as an oppressor of minorities before 1914 and Germany's ally in two world wars. This basic positive association from 1956, supplanting a negative or nonexistent one, has persisted and remains a national treasure—or asset, to use language more appropriate to the 1990s—as the country strives to join the EU and NATO.

Another consequence that emerged immediately but also endured was the impact on the left throughout the world. This was a moment of bitter disillusionment with Soviet communism, of growing doubts in communist hearts, and the parting of ways between democratic and undemocratic socialists. The Chinese historian Jian Chen argues that it also hastened the great split between communist China and the Soviet Union.

Beyond this, however, someone reflecting on the tenth anniversary of the revolution, in 1966, would have been pushed to find many more elements of positive legacy, of clear gain to set against the obvious loss. On the twentieth anniversary, in 1976, one could already add something more. By this time it was clear that the Kádár regime was, if not more "liberal" than other communist regimes in Eastern Europe—that label was always misplaced—then certainly more cautious, circumspect, indirect, subtle, velvet-gloved in the way it treated its own people.[7] This could be and was traced back to the trauma of 1956, when the communist party and state had collapsed in a matter of a few days, and perhaps also, more even than we guessed at the time, to Kádár's personal sense of guilt. On the thirtieth anniversary, in 1986, one might have added the growing importance in Hungarian independent and oppositional thinking of the rediscovery of intellectual and political tendencies of 1956—for example, the work of the distinguished political thinker István Bibó, author of a famous last declaration on behalf of the Nagy government.[8]

The great temptation, of course, is to draw a straight line from 1956 to 1989. There is a very narrow boundary between the historian's privilege of hindsight and Bergson's "illusions of retrospective determinism." Nonetheless, there are connections to be made. For example, I do not think that it is fanciful to make a connection between Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe in 1956 and that in 1989. Top Soviet policymakers, starting with Gorbachev, clearly remembered the political cost to the Soviet Union of the interventions in 1956 as well as 1968. In 1956, the Soviet leaders did not know what to do and therefore used force. In 1989, the Soviet leaders also did not know what to do—but they did know what not to do: use force.

Nor is it fanciful to see Hungary 1956 as an important milepost in what may be described as the cumulative learning process of Central European oppositions and governments, from the sheer outburst of popular fury in East Berlin in 1953, through 1956 in Poland and Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia, 1980–1981 in Poland, to the sophisticated peaceful change of system in

[6] *Victoire d'une défaite* is the title of the original French edition (Fayard, 1968). The English edition is entitled *Budapest 1956: A History of the Hungarian Revolution* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971).

[7] Suitably enough, Miklós Haraszti's book on the position of artists under Kádárism was entitled *The Velvet Prison* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). See also my "The Hungarian Lesson" in *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, new ed. (London: Penguin, 1999).

[8] See István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination: Selected Writings*, ed. Károly Nagy (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs, 1991).

1989–1990, which I christened "refolution."[9] Moreover, it is undeniable that the largest symbolic event in the Hungarian refolution of 1989 was the ceremonial reburial of Imre Nagy on 16 June, the anniversary of his execution in 1958. The six coffins laid out on Heroes' Square, the revolutionary flags once again hanging from the lampposts: an occasion unforgettable to anyone who was there. And the past was a catalyst of the future.

However, the emergence of new evidence already slightly changes our view even of that very recent event. Documents found in the Interior Ministry archives by the longtime oppositionist János Kenedi now show how both the party leadership and the still active secret police used all possible means at their disposal—including, for example, "agents of influence" who had access to the American ambassador—to ensure that the reburial and attendant ceremonies passed off peacefully.[10] Kádár's successors, the new reform communists of 1989, appealed directly and indirectly to Nagy's surviving comrades, the reform communists of 1956.

The kaleidoscope does not stop turning. Now, in 1996, it is a free Hungary. The president of the republic, Árpád Göncz, was himself imprisoned for his attempts to mediate after the 1956 revolution, having been tried together with István Bibó. Wise, warm, avuncular, he is supremely fitted to mark the anniversary. The famous Plot 301 in a remote corner of the municipal cemetery, where Nagy and his comrades were given indecent burial after their execution in 1958, was a site of weeds and rubbish dumps when I first visited it in 1988 and still a place of freshly turned earth and recent clearing at the reburial in 1989. Now it has neat turf, marble tablets, paving stones, a monument—everything that belongs to an official place of public memory.

So far, so good. But the current government of the country is dominated by the Hungarian Socialist Party, the main successor to the ruling communist party. The socialists were elected, with a landslide majority, in 1994 and govern in coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats, the main heirs to the liberal-democratic opposition of the 1980s, who now find themselves a junior and uncomfortable partner of the post-communists. And the prime minister, Gyula Horn? Well, he was a reform communist in the 1980s, and as foreign minister he was partly responsible for opening the Iron Curtain to Austria in 1989 and letting the East Germans out later that year—thus beginning the end of the Berlin Wall. But in 1956? No, in 1956 young Gyula, aged twenty-four, was a member of the feared and hated volunteer militias, known on account of their distinctive heavy quilted jackets as the *pufajkások* (roughly, "quilted-jacket guys'), who fought, detained, and beat up those who continued to resist.

He has explained his actions. He was young, and he blamed the revolutionaries for the death of a much-loved elder brother. He has, up to a point, apologized. He has, in a way, tried to make amends—for example, by increasing special pensions for the survivors. But his way of dealing with the problem is deeply ambiguous. For it also involves trying to draw a line under the past—and to claim Nagy's inheritance. Soon after becoming prime minister, he joined Imre Nagy's daughter in a ceremony at Plot 301 to mark the anniversary of the revolution. Then, earlier this year, it was Horn who proposed in parliament a special commemorative law to mark the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Imre Nagy. The Free Democrats did not know which way to turn. Of course Nagy should be honored, but at the initiative of a man like Horn? In the end, they abstained. This strange custom of the commemorative law, incidentally, has a history in Hungary reaching back into the nineteenth century. The hero of the 1848–1849 revolution, Lajos Kossuth, for example, was thus commemorated after his death. However, the last person to have been so honored by the Hungarian parliament was Joseph Stalin. And the man who proposed that tribute? The then president of the parliament, Imre Nagy. In Hungary, the ironies and ambiguities just never seem to stop.

How many more turns of the kaleidoscope will we see? As it looks now, Hungary has a very good chance of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution as a full member of what we

[9] "Refolution in Hungary and Poland," *The New York Review of Books,* August 17, 1989.

[10] János Kenedi, *Kis Állambiztonsági Olvasókönyv a Kádár-korszakban* (A small reader on the state security services in the Kádár period) (Budapest: Magvetö, 1996).

unreflectingly call "Europe" and "the West." Of the EU, that is. And of NATO. It will thus become, to recall John Foster Dulles's words in 1956, a military ally of the United States. But what will those two things mean in 2006? What will the internal condition of Hungary be then, and how will it affect Hungarians' views of 1956? How much more, and how much less, will we then know about the revolution? It is precisely the mark of great events that their meaning constantly changes, is forever disputed, with some questions never finally answered. Questions such as, What happened in France in 1789?

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