

*"Moscow can only slow down the processes of change"*

## Hungary Remembered: 1956-81

BY JOHN P. C. MATTHEWS

It was on October 23, twenty-five years ago, that Hungarian students first took to the streets of Budapest, shouting slogans and addressing demands to the regime. The unexpectedly harsh reaction to those demands touched off what is called the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—the two weeks of patriotic struggle, revolution, and heady freedom that came to an end with the brutal predawn drive of the Soviet military machine.

Actually, fierce fighting continued for another ten days and was carried on sporadically for weeks. "Freedom radios" transmitted regularly through November 9, and the last did not fall silent for many days beyond that. Workers' and revolutionary councils, though outlawed by decree, functioned throughout much of the country until well into the next year. Compulsory Russian was abolished in the universities in late November (not to be reinstated until February, 1957) and a general strike paralyzed the country for months.

Thoughts of Hungary '56 lead to thoughts of Poland today, yet the circumstances are quite different. More than any other Soviet satellite, Hungary had been compressed and sovietized. Then, three-and-a-half years after Stalin's death and only a few months after the fall of Hungary's own "little Stalin," Matyas Rakosi, talk of liberalization and rehabilitation filled the air. When the authorities tried to clamp the valve shut, the result was an explosion.

Poland, on the other hand, did not experience the same unrelenting sovietization. Though it embarked on the same de-Stalinizing track as Hungary in 1956, there were no victims of show trials to rehabilitate posthumously, no giant statues of Stalin to topple. Moreover, what timely changes were effected prevented the "Polish October" of 1956 from blowing up into a revolution. Since then, though, the Soviet-backed Communist party, slowly clamping down and chipping away at the "October gains," has caused the deterioration of Poland's social and economic fabric. The current "renewal" in Poland is, as Lech Walesa said last June, "the solidarity of honest people [read 'most Poles'] against dishonest people [read 'most Party people']." The role of the Polish Church, a longer gestation period (thirty-five years versus ten), a whole new generation of workers, ten years' intense exposure to the West, and the unity

of the massive Solidarity movement—all these differentiate the situation in Poland today from that of Hungary a quarter-century ago. And yet there are similarities worth noting.

Just as Poles have harked back to historical precedents, so the students of Budapest invoked the glorious deeds of Hungarian history; each national group, despite years of Communist schooling, knew these by heart. Like Poland, Hungary has a history that goes back over a thousand years, marked by struggles to remain independent that entailed wars against Turks, Russians, and their more powerful Germanic neighbors. For inspiration the Hungarian students invoked the spirit of Lajos Kossuth and the Revolution of 1848, recalling the immortal words of the young poet Sandor Petöfi who wrote, on the eve of that revolution, what soon became the national song. "Hungarians arise, your country calls you!" the song begins. "We swear, we swear by the God of the Magyars that we will no longer be slaves!" is its refrain.

It was in fact to the Petöfi Memorial in Pest that the student demonstrators first headed on October 23. There, under the statue of Petöfi delivering his famous poem, a student leader struck an identical pose, reciting the poem while his fellow demonstrators roared out the refrain. Then, flowing down the Danube embankment, they crossed over to Buda and the statue of General Jozef Bem, another hero of the Revolution of 1848.

Bem was not a Hungarian but a Pole who, in the service of Kossuth; had successfully defeated the Austrian armies in Transylvania and fought the Russians when they intervened in 1849 to crush the revolution. On this day in October, 1956, Hungary's history again became entwined with Poland's. The students knew that Wladyslaw Gomulka had just been reinstated as Party leader in Warsaw, despite a surprise visit by Khrushchev, Mikoyan, and Molotov to Poland to block that very move. The Russians' October 19 visit had taken on the appearance of a showdown, with Soviet tanks moving on Warsaw from their base in the south and armed Polish workers remaining all night in their factories in Warsaw's suburbs. The Poles stood firm; Khrushchev and company left Warsaw as suddenly as they had come, the Soviet tanks returned to their base, and Gomulka's "Polish October" began.

The main reason for the students' demonstration in Hungary was to show solidarity with events in Poland. At the Bem statue the group from Pest met a column

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from the Technical University, where, on the previous day, a stormy meeting had produced a list of sixteen demands. These were now read out to the crowd, swelled by ordinary citizens to over 200,000. After poems, speeches, wreath-laying, and the national anthem, most of the crowd dispersed.

At 7:00 P.M. the new secretary of the Hungarian Communist party, Ernő Gerő, was scheduled to make a radio speech about his trip to Yugoslavia. People assumed it would also contain a reply to the student demands and that, in keeping with the times, it would be conciliatory. Instead it was unusually harsh and loaded with all the old Stalinist clichés.

Enraged, the students took their list of demands to the radio station, insisting they be broadcast to the nation. When it became clear that their request was being denied, they stormed the building in an effort to free their delegation, which had been arrested by the security police, the AVO. Tear gas canisters fired from windows were tossed back inside by the students. The AVO started firing on the crowd below, killing a number of students. Army units called to reinforce the security police were stopped by the crowd and, upon being apprised of the situation, freely handed over their weapons. In no time a full-scale battle was on.

Enlarged later by heavy AVO reinforcements and workers from Csepel, who had access to their own militia arsenals, the battle raged until 7:00 A.M., when students and workers finally occupied the radio building. Other demonstrators had gone the same night to Heroes Square to pull down the twenty-six-foot-high statue of Stalin, resorting to welding torches when winches and cables failed.

By early morning there were Soviet tanks in the streets, martial law had been declared, and Radio Budapest announced a new government under Imre Nagy. In fact Nagy—a national Communist who, like Gomulka, had once headed a more liberal regime—was a prisoner and unable to act on his own until October 25.

News of the fighting in Budapest spread like wildfire around the country, aided by Western radio broadcasts. Within forty-eight hours small risings, most of them peaceful—though a few, where the AVO resisted, exceedingly bloody—had taken place all over Hungary. Revolutionary councils and workers' councils were sprouting everywhere, with a takeover of local radio stations their first order of business. Many of the relatively faint signals they sent were picked up by Radio Free Europe and rebroadcast at far greater power.

The hated secret police began to disintegrate. AVO men were hunted like rats, and some were beaten to death or lynched, though the majority simply were taken into custody for trials destined never to be held.

Soon there emerged those most fanatical of Hungarian patriots, dubbed "freedom fighters." Neither university students nor workers, these were teenagers and even children who had known nothing but communism yet who fought on long after their elders had given up.

After two days of battles between Soviet tanks and freedom fighters armed with molotov cocktails, the Soviets called off their attack. Some soldiers emerged from their tanks and began to fraternize with the peo-

ple of Budapest. A number of the tank commanders were even persuaded to join a peaceful demonstration in Parliament Square.

When AVO on the rooftops around the square suddenly opened fire on the unarmed demonstrators, the Soviet soldiers, assuming they had been led into an ambush, jumped back in their tanks and began to mow down everything in sight. Hundreds of people were slaughtered in a few minutes. The revolution was on again. Fighting continued for another five days, though the Soviets agreed on the 30th to withdraw from Budapest and did so on the following day.

Meantime the Nagy government was being deluged with worker delegations from all over the country demanding reforms that Nagy would later announce his intention of carrying out. The government's composition changed almost daily; liberal Communists replaced hard-liners, then non-Communist leaders of democratic parties were added.

On October 30 came a startling announcement from the Soviet Central Committee, an admission—the first since 1945—that "mistakes" had been made by Moscow in its dealings with its East European neighbors. Economic relations should now be realigned "so as to remove any possibility of violating the principles of national-sovereignty." The USSR was ready to negotiate with Hungary and other Warsaw Pact members on the question of total withdrawal of Soviet forces from Hungary, on the presence of Soviet troops in Poland and Rumania, and the withdrawal of Soviet military advisors and specialists.

In fact the Soviets *did* soon withdraw their advisors from all these countries and, in 1958, withdrew their troops from Rumania—indicating that, as the good chess players they are known to be, they were prepared to take up this option. But from the promised talks about withdrawing their troops from Hungary and Poland the Soviets were saved by Suez. Less than twenty-four hours after Moscow's declaration, British and French planes were over the Canal. With the Western powers so diverted, there was nothing to prevent the Soviets from having their way in Hungary.

Between October 31 and November 4, seven Soviet divisions and over a thousand tanks crossed into Hungary from the east. Soviet assurances that these were only replacing troops being withdrawn gained some credence in the West. Negotiations between Major General Pal Maleter, hero of the Revolution, and the Soviet commandant for full Soviet withdrawal had begun on the afternoon of November 3. Maleter went to the Soviet embassy at 9:00 that night to continue the negotiations and was never seen by the public again.

## **BLAZING A PATH**

November 4 is for Hungary a date which will "live in infamy." Some of us can still hear the desperate, dying voices of those free radios: "Civilized people of the world, listen and come to our aid, not with declarations but with force.... We implore you to help us in the name of justice, of freedom, of the binding moral principle of active solidarity. Our ship is sinking. Light is failing, the shadows grow darker every hour over the soil of Hungary. Listen to our cry,...and act...."

"It is understandable," Archibald MacLeish wrote a few weeks later, "that we in the United States should feel shamed by our inability to act...." The shame we Americans felt, of course, was linked to our knowledge that for four years our secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, and others in the Eisenhower administration had spoken freely of a "liberation policy" and of "rolling back the Iron Curtain" in statements that made all too deep an impression on Eastern Europeans when broadcast by the American installation Radio Free Europe. "Nevertheless," MacLeish went on, "we should not forget that their defeat has been a triumph in itself. Those Hungarian students and workers and women and fighting children have done more to close the future to communism than armies or diplomats had done before them...." Somewhat closer to the scene, BBC broadcaster George Urban wrote: "Abhorrence and pious obituaries cannot exonerate the Western leaders and, above all, the American President, from the guilt from which they rightly suffer: that of not having tried."

While stirring speeches and resolutions condemning the Soviet Union were being offered in the U.N., the revolution in Hungary went on. When Janos Kadar, a member of the Imre Nagy government, was proclaimed by Russian radio on November 4 to be premier of a new government, the whole nation looked upon him with loathing. Long after an order of sorts had been restored, bogus police posters made their appearance all over the country bearing such messages as "Warning: Ten million counterrevolutionaries are at large in the country," and "Reward: For anyone who can find one supporter of the Kadar government in the Hungarian population."

With Budapest in virtual ruins, over 200,000 citizens already fled to the West, and the country gripped by a general strike, the prognosis was for a winter of death by cold and starvation. That this did not occur can be attributed largely to the USSR. Stung by worldwide condemnation for their action, stonings of their embassies, and heavy defections from Communist parties around the world, the Soviets set about removing as quickly as possible all evidence of their crime. Prodigious quantities of cement, bricks, and glass were diverted to Budapest from all parts of the Soviet empire, as were foodstuffs. Within a few years little trace of the fighting could be seen.

Although arrests, deportations, trials, and executions proceeded, Kadar was careful to ensure that the old ways of the AVO were a thing of the past. The announcement by Radio Moscow on June 17, 1958, that Imre Nagy and Pal Maleter had been tried and executed came like the aftershock of an earthquake. Hungarians noted with interest that this first announcement came from Moscow, and they assumed it was Soviet, not Hungarian "justice" that was meted out. By then, with much of the city rebuilt and material goods filling the shops, Kadar's "Goulash Communism," blessed by Nikita Khrushchev, was well under way.

Yet Kadar realized he still had only a tiny minority with him. He thus announced a new policy. From then on those who had not declared themselves against the government would be considered for it. Since few cared to show open opposition, this enabled the Party to pre-

tend it had a majority of the nation with it. Curiously enough the strategy worked.

By the mid-1960s, Hungary was the most relaxed and liberal country in the Soviet bloc. Kadar, by this time grudgingly admired for his nationalism and his cleverness in dealing with the Russians, must have struck a bargain with Moscow: Hungary would follow slavishly the Soviet line on foreign policy and would curb its cultural life if Moscow gave it free rein in economic affairs. The deal enabled Hungary in 1968 to launch its New Economic Mechanism (NEM), a program of decentralization, market incentives, and slow phasing out of uneconomical government subsidies. The NEM brought such prosperity to Hungary that by the mid-1970s, Budapest had become not only the vacation mecca for the Communist world, but a major tourist attraction for Westerners.

An NEM was precisely what Poland needed in 1968 but did not get. Three Polish Government attempts at large price hikes each precipitated revolts by the workers followed by frightened pullbacks by the Party. But if the Poles did not learn the economic lessons of the Hungarian experience, at least they learned some political ones. The Polish revolution of 1980 assiduously avoided any sort of armed conflict, demands for a multiparty state, or withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact.

#### GIVING CREDIT

From the perspective of twenty-five years, what can we say about the Hungarian Revolution? Was it simply a flash in the pan, a heroic but futile gesture that brought only death and division, more repression and misery for the Hungarian people? How is it that Hungary today has the highest standard of consumer living of all the countries of Eastern Europe, the most liberal policy of travel to the West, with which it carries on 50 per cent of its trade? Janos Kadar can take much of the credit for the state of Hungary today, but without the Revolution—the memory of which has been his major chip in bargaining with the Russians—there could have been no Kadar reforms.

"This event will probably not be repeated," wrote the Yugoslav Communist sage Milovan Djilas in the November 19, 1956, issue of *The New Leader*, an article that later earned him three years in a Yugoslav jail. "But the Hungarian Revolution blazed a path which sooner or later other Communist countries must follow....Despite the Soviet repression in Hungary, Moscow can only slow down the processes of change; it cannot stop them in the long run. The crisis is not only between the USSR and its neighbors, but within the Communist system as such. National Communism is itself a product of the crisis, but it is only a phase in the evolution and withering away of contemporary Communism...."

Until 1956 people on both sides of the iron curtain were prone to believe that communism's advance was inexorable and inevitable. The Hungarians put an end to that. The demise of communism in Eastern Europe dates from that revolution, and there is clear evidence it is dying in the Soviet Union today. Only the Russian empire remains, but Poland's revolution of 1980 marks the beginning of its end. **WV**