

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956

Martin Glaberman

Sandor Kopacsi, *"In the Name of the Working Class": The Inside Story of the Hungarian Revolution* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys 1986).

Janos Berecz, *1956 Counter-Revolution in Hungary* (Budapest: Adakemiai Kiado, distributed by Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1986).

The times of that superstition which attributed revolutions to the ill-will of a few agitators have long passed away. Everyone knows nowadays that, wherever there is a revolutionary convulsion, there must be some social want in the background which is prevented by outworn institutions from satisfying itself.... Every attempt at forcible repression will only bring it forth stronger until it bursts its fetters.

Karl Marx

THE YEAR 1956 was the most significant in the post-war history of Europe. Early that year, Khrushchev delivered his famous "secret" speech denouncing the crimes of Stalin to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. In June, a workers' uprising in the Polish city of Poznan was brutally crushed by military action. There was a sign of what was to come, however, in the retreat of the Polish Communist government in the face of ongoing working-class resistance, a retreat reflected in the surprisingly mild sentences meted out to those arrested in Poznan. In Hungary, growing unrest punctuated the summer of 1956. Brief wildcat strikes took place in some factories, usually aimed to dislodge foremen or union officials who were viewed by the workers as secret-police agents. Ferment also began to quicken among students and intellectuals, and culminated in the formation and growing influence of the Petofi Circle, an informal discussion group which regularly addressed problems facing the nation and criticized the regime.

In October, a confrontation between Poland and the Soviet Union came to a head. A new, more-liberal leadership was at the head of the Polish Party under Gomulka. One of the points of contention was Soviet insistence that the Polish military be headed by Rokossovsky, a native of Poland but a member of the Russian Central Committee and the Soviet Communist Party. Workers councils were being formed in Polish factories, urging the new Polish leadership to resist Russian demands.

Martin Glaberman, "The Hungarian Revolution of 1956," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (Fall 1989), 239-243.

The Hungarian Revolution began as a protest in support of the Poles. Students and intellectuals called for a demonstration on 23 October in the square ornamented by a statue of Joseph Bem, a Pole who fought in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. The Hungarian government responded uncertainly: it first banned and then permitted the demonstration. The demonstration was, of course, not announced in the press or on the radio. Nevertheless, the crowd which assembled in the square was much larger than anyone expected — some estimates are as high as 200 thousand people. There were the usual speeches and presentation of demands, including those for greater political and intellectual freedom, withdrawal of Soviet military forces, and an end to the drain on the Hungarian economy by the Russians. The government failed to respond, and this led to a further demand that the issues be aired on Hungarian radio. No one knew exactly what to do, but when the demonstration began to break up, many in the crowd began marching to the headquarters of the Hungarian government radio service. As it was late afternoon, the demonstrators were joined by workers who were heading home from work.

When the demonstrators reached the square facing the radio station, the secret police, *Allam Védelmi Osztag (AVO)*, opened fire on the marchers. Street-fighting began. Almost from the start, Hungarian soldiers were seen turning over their weapons to the populace, or joining the side of the people directly. The Russians began to move tanks into Budapest to quell the disturbances, but failed.

Within 24 hours the workers of Budapest formed workers' councils and occupied the factories and offices in the capital. Within one more day, these actions had been repeated throughout Hungary. Thus, what began as street-fighting in Budapest was transformed into a social revolution, an attempt by the working class to seize economic and political power in the country. The disintegration of the Hungarian armed forces was one of the factors that made this possible. Another was the undependability of the Soviet forces, most of whom had lived in Hungary for years, and were perfectly aware that they were witnessing a popular uprising. Precise numbers are unavailable, but there were defections among the Russian troops and, in a number of instances, Russian garrisons arranged a truce with neighbouring towns, agreeing not to fire on the Hungarians if they were left alone, and were allowed food and supplies. Part of the story of the Hungarian Revolution is the vindictive response of the Soviet authorities to their own people, who may not have measured up to the demands placed upon them.

The revolution did not have much time to develop. The Hungarian Workers Party was dissolved and reconstituted as the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party. The government was headed by Imre Nagy, a liberal Communist, and the Party by another Communist who had suffered at the hands of the Stalinists, Janos Kadar. It was Kadar who betrayed the revolution and became the puppet of the Soviets. What developed was essentially a form of dual power, power shared by the workers councils and the Nagy government. Interesting exchanges between Radio Budapest (in the hands of the government) and some of the provincial radio stations (in the hands of the workers councils) took place, with broadcasts from industrial towns

making demands on the Nagy government. The next day the government radio would respond by accepting the demands (more or less). Then the provincial radio would announce that they had already carried out their demands, without waiting for the government. Political parties, other than the Communist, also began to form. There was, however, no great popular demand for them. They essentially remained committees at the top that sought to reconstitute the Social Democratic, Peasant, and other parties.

The Soviet Army withdrew part of its Hungarian garrison. But in early November, massive movements of fresh troops back into Hungary gave the Russians control of the countryside. On 4 November, they attacked Budapest. The last section of the capital to fall (on 11 November) was the workers' stronghold of Czepe! which, in pre-Communist days, was known as Red Czepe!.

What is most remarkable about the Hungarian Revolution is that although the military resistance crumbled, the resistance of the working class did not. Strikes continued and the workers' councils continued to function. On 14 November the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest was organized. The Kadar government was forced to negotiate with the Central Workers' Council to try to get production going again — but this was combined with a campaign of arrests and intimidation. In December, there was an attempt to set up a National Workers' Council. Finally, on 15 January 1957, the Central Workers' Council of Budapest, still functioning illegally, issued its last appeal to workers to continue their resistance.

The Western powers, especially the United States, took whatever propaganda advantage they could from the situation. This was rather limited, because in the week before the Soviets invaded Hungary, the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Suez took place. In any case, the West took a hands-off position. They made it clear that they would not support the Hungarians, and ignored the Nagy government's appeals to the United Nations. There was an interesting turn in American propaganda to the Soviet bloc. During the Cold War years, Radio Free Europe had routinely called for revolt in Eastern Europe. After the Hungarian Revolution, this appeal never was heard again. It was obvious that the Hungarian workers were trying to establish a neutral, democratic, socialist society, not a western capitalist one.

Much has been written about the Hungarian Revolution, usually published at ten-year intervals to celebrate anniversaries of the Revolution. As might be expected of a subject involving fierce partisan ideological conflicts, the publications are of very mixed quality.

Sandor Kopacsi's book gets off on the wrong foot in its subtitle: "The Inside Story of the Hungarian Revolution." But the revolution was not an inside job. It was a popular mass explosion. Kopacsi's position did not help him to see that. He was the police-chief of Budapest, a worker who had fought in the resistance against Hitler and who had worked to ascend the Communist hierarchy. He indicates that he supported Imre Nagy and Janos Kadar, but he achieved his position as police-

chief under Matyas Rakosi's Stalinist regime. The book essentially is a memoir, the first third of which deals with Kopacsi's own experiences during the pre-revolutionary period. Much of it is interesting in exposing how the bureaucracy functioned. But the book suffers from several limitations. One is the author's use of quotations to represent conversations at which he was not present. Even where he was present, it is not conceivable that, without notes, he would remember conversations verbatim that took place years and decades previously. As a consequence, although the story he tells conforms generally to what is known about the Hungarian Revolution, the details are not easily verifiable. Too much seems to be designed to show Kopacsi as a good guy. There is virtually nothing that would indicate that Kopacsi ever did anything that violated the most noble Marxist ethics. Some of the stories seem exaggerated. For example, with the Russians already invading Budapest for the second time, and the former police-chief walking the streets to evade arrest, he runs into Cardinal Mindzenty, the extreme right-wing Catholic prelate who had been freed from house arrest during the revolution. It seems that Mindzenty is having trouble finding the American Embassy, and that Kopacsi points him in the right direction. (191) This is a bit much.

Kopacsi was not a revolutionary. But he was a supporter of the government of Imre Nagy, and was made second in command of the government's reconstituted military forces (with Bela Kiraly as Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of National Defense, and Pal Maleter as Defense Minister). When the revolution was crushed, Kopacsi was arrested and ultimately tried with Nagy, Maleter, and others. He escaped hanging, but was sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1963 he was freed in a general amnesty and returned to factory employment. In the 1970s, he was allowed to emigrate, and came to Canada. He now is a Canadian citizen working at a blue-collar job. The book is not helped by the lack of an index.

The book by Berecz presents the official line of the Hungarian government. Anyone who would be interested in a book by Ronald Reagan telling the story of the Nicaraguan contras' fight for "democracy" might be interested in this book. I can't think of anyone else who would, unless they were a lover of historical fiction. It is full of distortions, exaggerations, and outright lies. One example: there is a multitude of evidence that the fighting began as demonstrators approached the square in front of the Budapest radio station and were fired upon by the AVO guarding the station. But Berecz writes, "At the Hungarian Radio the first shots were fired after 8 p.m. and the organized seige began after 10 p.m. Not until midnight were the defenders given the order allowing them to return the fire." (104) Of course, I must admit that he does not say that the AVO did *not* fire before midnight, but it is clear that he hopes to give that impression.

One of the problems with the Hungarian Revolution in history is that it has virtually no defenders, no Marx on the Commune or Lenin on 1905. The Right has no interest in it other than as a stick with which to beat the Soviets. The Communists insist that it was counter-revolution. And most of the rest of the Left has considerable difficulty in dealing with a revolution that does not conform to their precon-

ceived political views. Yet this revolution by the working class against a state capitalist society conforms quite nicely to Marx's understanding of proletarian revolution.

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