



Online Publication
July 2011

New Publication:

JÁNOS M. RAINER
INTRODUCTION

Originally published in:

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet Bloc Countries: Reactions and Repercussions

Edited by János M. Rainer, Katalin Somlai

The Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, Budapest, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The Budapest 1956 Institute and the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security held a conference on September 22–3, 2006, one month before the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Historians of 15 countries took part and 26 lectures were heard. The conference was opened by Katalin Szili, speaker of the Hungarian Parliament, and introduced by the writer of these lines. The concluding words came from Thomas Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, Washington DC. This volume selects ten of the contributions, which appear in an expanded, edited form. Part I of this introduction follows the line of argument advanced in the introduction to the conference. Attention is then drawn to some results of the conference, but without intending to draw up a final balance.

I

Two aspects were examined before the subject-matter of the anniversary conference was decided. One was where the historiography of the Hungarian Revolution stood (primarily in Hungary itself) fifty years after the event and a good decade-and-a-half after Hungarian and East European transition to democracy. The other was what specific problems faced by today's historians of 1956 were particularly relevant to international historical discourse.

1. The historiography of the Hungarian Revolution had more than three decades behind it in 1989. Right up until the system changes in Hungary and Eastern Europe, it had been subject to three deciding factors:

- a) Linguistic difficulties meant that most of the works had been written by Hungarians, or at least the longer and more decisive contributions.

- b) Discourse in the West, strongly influenced by the Hungarian émigré community, had hardly any contact with the communist historiography at home, but both sides felt themselves to be in situation of constant debate.
- c) The dominant frame of interpretation for the history of '56 was political history and Kremlinology, with totalitarianism as its explanatory paradigm.

The events of 1989 brought immediate fundamental change in several respects. Research and public discourse about the past became freer and more varied within Hungary as well. The archive sources for the period became accessible for the whole period since 1945. Contacts were made with international research into the contemporary period.

The memory of '56 played a key part in Hungary's change of system. The legitimacy of the Kádár regime rested on a complex system of concessions, freedoms and benefits for society. That legitimacy weakened when it proved impossible to sustain these for economic reasons (above all the steady increase in the standard of living). The process became apparent through open discourse on the recent past. The charge sheet listed crimes from the past, but the accused was the present Kádárite system. Its main crime had been to crush the '56 Revolution and to execute participants in it, including the emblematic figure of Imre Nagy. In part, the exceptional situation that developed in 1989 still determines the historiography of '56 to this day.

8

After 1989, there was an explosive increase in the quantity of knowledge about the revolution. Fifty-six has become in the last 15 years perhaps the best most studied juncture in 20th-century Hungarian history, these being the most important and fruitful fields of research:

- a) The first to mention is the international context of '56. The documentation of Soviet and American perceptions and decision making became available through a so-called *archive revolution*. Fifty-six as a crisis in the Cold War has been central to the new Cold War historiography. The peak came with the 1996 international historians' conference in Budapest and publication and interpretation of the so-called Malin Notes.
- b) Individual and collective biographies of several of the main actors appeared (Imre Nagy, Géza Losonczy, Pál Maléter, armed insurgents, etc.)
- c) Broad source-publishing activity took place, including records of the central authorities (the party, the government, the commands of the armed forces), press reports and radio broadcasts, documents of central and local revolutionary bodies, and documents produced during the reprisals.
- d) Treatment has started of the live experiences, the oral history of '56. Great attention was turned at the beginning of the 2000s to tendencies in the way the revolution is recollected.

- e) Apart from that, there have appeared a large number of summaries of '56, of varying standard. Fifty-six has been included in the new summaries and textbooks of 20th-century Hungarian history.
- f) Historical research has served as the basis for innumerable documentaries, television programmes and Internet websites. The new popular media have generated a huge demand for research findings. Many historians of the contemporary period are carrying out extensive *service* activities. A veritable recollection industry or history industry has emerged, with its own professionals.

2. What sharp conceptual differences can be seen in scholarly interpretation of '56, especially since the change of system? In fact *scholarly* interpretation shows fewer strong differences. The writings of today essentially follow, under different conditions, a line of discourse stretching back for 40–45 years. The main dividing line developed back in the 1950s and 1960s, when left-wing, post-Marxist historians did not see the history of Soviet-type socialism as something closed, and the Hungarian Revolution as one of the most hopeful attempts to move away from Stalinism. Those who saw the history of Soviet socialism as closed, on the other hand, saw '56 as an anti-totalitarian and/or national uprising, revolution, or struggle for liberty. Even in that early literature, the greatest effect was exerted by writings of a chronicle character, depicting a chain of events in bright colours, striving to present individual and collective participants, and above all, human values seen to be universal. These accounts were written mainly by eye-witnesses, or those gaining most attention and success were. This was the pattern followed by most of the historiography after 1989. Most of the historical narratives about '56 were slotted in among the various chronicles. The history of the Soviet system and its reforms had ended and Marxist contemporary history was pushed onto the defensive, so that the dominant framework of interpretation of '56 derived from the theory of totalitarianism.

When choosing the subject for the conference, we decided we did not want to reiterate the overall history of the Hungarian Revolution on this occasion. We started out from the fact that 1956 was a *common experience for East-Central Europe*. Everywhere west of the Soviet Union, the Stalinist system established very similar structures after the Second World War, and everywhere experienced some relaxation of these after Stalin's death. The shift from the classical (Stalinist) system towards reforms began in 1953 and continued to advance in the Soviet Union up to October. The Twentieth Congress of the Soviet party everywhere caused a strengthening of

the critical voices, in the party intelligentsia and the party leadership, and almost everywhere, an appreciable change of mood in the whole of society.

The Hungarian Revolution fits the definition of a political revolution, since it brought down a political system, if not permanently. The new that it put in place of the old remained unformed, its beginnings crushed by Soviet intervention and restoration. Despite its failure, it was an influential event, I think partly because it was short and concentrated. Budapest in '56 was an overture to the media age. Sound and picture had almost, but not quite come together. A little country suddenly rendered distant and inaccessible by the Iron Curtain was undergoing a political revolution that bore 19th-century features, with classic participants and classic contents. Its short duration, immediate unexampled success (for events could be construed for some days to mean that the Hungarian rebellion had caused the Soviet Union to retreat), and subsequent defeat were open to a range of explanations. The Hungarian Revolution remained forever an *open* story, through which everybody's own view of the world could be vindicated. It could be seen at once as an obviously anti-totalitarian revolution, an experiment in building a new type of self-managing socialism, or simply as a rebellion against all types of tyranny, a battle for national liberation. Its effects—in terms of what it ended or what it began—were delayed and limited. Fifty-six is one of the main bases of comparison for the social *learning and adaptation* process that occurred in the East-Central European variants of the Soviet system, but it is not the only such basis.

10

This interaction between imposed elites and subdued societies lasted from the Sovietization of the region to the end of the Soviet system there. The essence of it was an attempt to complete the Stalinist project (or so the chosen leaders who arrived with the Red Army thought), and then an effort to move away from that by seeking local variants and strategies. (The search for a road occupied from the outset the minds of those such as Imre Nagy, who mistook Stalin's political manoeuvrings, a couple of years after 1945, for a chance to think in terms of real national variants of communism.) So '56 did not bring classical Stalinism to an end (even after a delay or to a limited extent), but it presented a strong argument to those who would have liked to end it. Fifty-six, broke out just as a short and rather ineffectual period of reform, was giving way to limited re-Stalinization, which was only to be followed by further initiatives for reform.

All these questions point to the *importance of comparative researches*. This led to the idea of focusing the conference on the history of the influence of 1956, or within it, its influence on the countries of the Soviet Bloc. We would try to examine how the crisis was experienced by the communist leaders and the societies of the East-Central

European region. What leadership discussions had mentioned 1956, Budapest, national communism, the mass movements, and so on? What was the social reception and how did the memory of '56 survive? Especially interesting were the reactions of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries, and how events in Budapest affected official policy towards them.

II

The first question central to the conference in effect continued the discourse on “the new Cold War history” that followed the archive revolution of the 1990s. But rather than wanting to know *how* the decisions on the Hungarian Revolution were made, it was more concerned with *why* those decisions had been reached and what consequences they would have. So it was about the *perception* and *reception* of the crisis that shook the communist world. The papers in this selection that attempted most closely to deal with that are those of Dragoş Petrescu, Oldřich Tůma, Shen Zhihua, and (partly, on a more local level) Juraj Marušiak and István Tóth, and (on a specific matter, the problem of Hungarian refugees) Katarina Kovačević.

Petrescu simply sees the turning point of '56 in Romania's separate road, the specifically Romanian brand of national communism: “The '56 Hungarian Revolution of 1956 proved an unexpected support for the Romanian communists in the sense of offering them a chance to display total loyalty to Moscow while desperately seeking to avert de-Stalinization and retain absolute power.” Tůma sees a much more limited influence of '56 on the Czechoslovak party leadership of the 1960s: “The false interpretation of the Soviet decision to intervene militarily in Hungary became one source of unrealistic strategy by the reform CPCz leaders, as it faced the mounting Soviet pressure and threats. The belief that '56 could not be repeated in Czechoslovakia was one reason why the CPCz leaders made no serious preparations for facing a possible intervention and why so little was done to avert it. The ‘Hungarian factor’, perceived in that way, may not have been dominant in 1956 or 1968, but it was a factor of importance.” Shen, on the other hand, sees the effect of 1956 as decisive in making the Chinese communist leadership an active contributor in the world political and international communist contexts: “China played a dominant role, first in pulling the Soviet troops out of Budapest and then in bringing them back. [...] It is more apposite to say that Mao Zedong attained his goal of criticizing the great-power chauvinism of Moscow and that of maintaining the unity of the socialist camp, than that China helped the Soviet Union tide over its crises. In that sense, the author agrees with scholars who say that one of

Khrushchev's decisive acts in handling the crises of 1956 was to bring China into Europe. In starting to become involved in East European affairs, the CCP symbolically ascended a new flight of steps in its position and role in the international communist movement. Thereafter Moscow's leadership of the communist world began to be challenged from Beijing."

The other focal point is that the reactions of the public in countries with a Soviet-type system first raised the question of sources. How is it possible to know what opinion people hold in a closed society, where publicity is strictly controlled? The special conditions of 1956 allowed the phenomenon of détente at least to open cracks in this wall. Under normal conditions in the Stalinist period, the press and publicity could not operate anywhere in East-Central Europe. Only temporarily and in certain places could more be written about the crisis of communism than previously. What did operate normally was the secret-police mechanism for sampling opinion in society. The reports of state security service informers and digests made of these have become available in recent years in several countries. Instructive examples of how to use this particular type of source have been given by Renáta Szentesi for East Germany, Juraj Marušiak for Slovakia, and Łukasz Kamiński for Poland. (Kamiński has also provided a compilation of texts to illustrate what he has to say.) All these sources, coupled with subsequent recollections provide at least a measure of insight into the reactions of society, which can obviously not be reconstructed in full. The sample over-represents the intelligentsia, of course. They were best able to exploit the limited opportunities for publicity, and the state security devoted particular attention to some intellectuals and groups they belonged to. This is well exemplified in the case studies of Szentesi and Alexandr Stykalin. Among the special cases of social reaction can be placed active demonstration of solidarity. This happened with the greatest force and largest, most conscious participation in Romania—the student movements there are the subject of Ioana Boca's study. Similar, though more sporadic and disorganized reactions are reported from the Hungarian-inhabited areas of Czechoslovakia by Marušiak, and from the Subcarpathian area of Ukraine (likewise with a partly Hungarian population) by Tóth.

No conference can aim to provide a comprehensive, conclusive response to the questions it raises, least of all in this case, where the intention was to concentrate on the areas less studied hitherto. Yet it seems that the leaders and at least the most active and best informed parts of the societies of the countries with Soviet-style systems were aware that 1956 really was common history. The Hungarian Revolution did not merely promise Hungary a way of breaking out of the Stalinist

empire (an empire in both the state political and the intellectual/ideological senses). The break-out failed, but the fate of the uprising served as a lesson and a legacy on the long road that would last more than thirty years longer. The people who fought in Budapest in 1956 were struggling for the freedom of the whole region under the Soviet system. Those who suffered repression for 1956 and Budapest, whether in Temesvár (Timișoara) or Moscow, East Berlin or the villages of Subcarpathia, were likewise victims of the Hungarian Revolution.

