



Online Publication
July 2011

New Publication:

OLDRICH TŮMA
THE IMPACT OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION ON
CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1956–1968

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

THE IMPACT OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION ON CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1956–1968

Any paper on Czechoslovakia and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 must consider briefly the question of why Czechoslovakia stayed calm, why the Czechs and Slovaks did not join the anti-Stalinist revolt launched by the Poles and Hungarians. Such a view of 1956 is apposite, because if they had, the Soviet bloc might have dissolved 33 years earlier than it did. Although that assumption is all too full of retrospective rationalization and wishful thinking, it is commonly met with in papers by historians and political scientists, and in works of fiction. The novel *Under the Frog*, by the British Hungarian Tibor Fischer, also has insurgents on the streets of Budapest discussing whether the Czechs will make a move too. So the question of why no move was made, or none that completed the circle of revolt, has become a topic of research and consideration by historians at home and abroad, such as Muriel Blaive, Karel Kaplan, Jiří Pernes and Jacques Rupnik.¹ Their conclusions are not identical, but they can be summed up in a simple way.

69

Czechoslovakia was in a generally different situation, notably because the outcome of World War II was perceived positively, not negatively, as in Hungary. There was a perceived hope that big changes in international politics would eventually bring the communist regime to an end, but also a potential threat that the situation attained in 1945 might be reversed. In border regions particularly, there was felt to be a threat from the situation created by displacement of the country's German population.² German revanchism and militarism remained a bogey in the regime's propaganda, and it has to be said, the tactic was quite an efficient one. On the other hand, historically conditioned antipathy to the Russians was not a factor of importance for Czech or Slovak society. Though the generally pro-Russian sympathies in 1945 were

1 Blaive 2001; Kaplan 1996; Pernes 2000; Rupnik 1996.

2 However, the issue may not have had quite the importance Blaive ascribes to it.

eroding and the official propaganda praising everything that came from the Soviet Union was counterproductive, but the surge of anti-Soviet feeling was not to come until 1968.

Fifty-six in Czechoslovakia did not bring a combination of political and socio-economic crisis. The communist regime had diverted, or rather postponed the imminent economic problems in the spring of 1953, with drastic currency reform and a drop in living standards that affected all sections of the population. The strong protest and widespread unrest elicited in some parts of the country were brutally suppressed, but the measures opened the way to visible increases in living standards in several subsequent years. Retail prices of foodstuffs and many other consumer goods were lowered six times between the autumn of 1953 and the autumn of 1956—twice in 1956 alone, accompanied by strident propaganda. Wages in most jobs, pensions and certain other social benefits were increased. Supplies of consumer goods were increased at last.³ In the end, Khrushchev himself put Czechoslovakia forward as an example in this, in an October 24, 1956 speech, where he contrasted it with Poland and Hungary.⁴

70

The regime of Antonín Novotný already had quite a firm grip of the situation and managed to respond adroitly and effectively in 1956 to the perceptible movement inside society and party. The 20th Congress of the CPSU produced mounting discussion, moves to convene an extraordinary congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz), and calls to identify those responsible for the faults and crimes of previous years. The regime staved off the first wave of criticism. Appeals for an extraordinary party congress were stilled, and an all-state party conference was held instead, with delegates nominated by regional committees, not elected by party branches. One high official—Alexej Čepička, a Politburo member and defence minister (and Klement Gottwald's son-in-law)—was chosen as a scapegoat. Although “breaches of socialist legality” and show trials had to be mentioned in the atmosphere produced by Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes, this was done in a cynical way, pinning them on Rudolf Slánský, former party general secretary, and a construct that came to be called “Slánskyism”. That was a neat solution as Slánský had been hanged in 1952, a victim of methods and conditions for which he himself was responsible. That conveniently left nobody to be punished or rehabilitated.⁵

The movements and criticisms were not confined to the party in the spring of 1956. CPCz policy (in culture particularly, but not exclusively) was boldly criticized

3 See Kaplan 1993; Pernes 2000.

4 Pernes 2000, 613.

5 See Blaive 2001, 102–105; Madry 1994, 26–32, especially 27.

in speeches at the 2nd Congress of Czechoslovak Writers. To this the regime did not initially dare to react. Although the desire to re-establish party control was clear in the criticisms made of writers at the party conference in June, no further measures of any note were taken.⁶ Radicalization also occurred among students in the spring of 1956. During the May rag days in Prague and Bratislava, there were protests in the form of happenings and processions, and the politically formulated demands were reinforced by a threat of a students' strike.⁷ The regime's response was cautious compared with what would have happened a few months earlier. Calm was restored in the universities by negotiation, false promises and selective intimidation, at least until the vacations.

The social movements in Czechoslovakia had culminated by the spring, so that communist regime could more or less control the overall situation through the summer and early autumn of 1956. But society was expecting big changes and eyeing developments in Poland, and still more then in Hungary, with close interest. The regime's response to events in Hungary was much sharper from the outset. All security units were placed on full alert on October 24 and the secret police activated its network of informers, with daily reviews of events and of the public mood being sent from the provinces to the centre.⁸ On October 25, it was decided to deploy army units along the Hungarian border. This was no easy task. The Second (Eastern) Military District consisted mainly of cadre (skeleton) and training units, making up only 5 per cent of the peacetime strength of the Czechoslovak army. The units were too weak and ill-armed with heavy weapons to handle the task of manning a frontier almost 700 km long. Higher army units from western areas were redeployed in Slovakia by the end of October.⁹

These measures were intended to isolate Hungary and prevent armed detachments penetrating Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile the Hungarian communists were supported with propaganda, supplies of leaflets, broadcasts and arms deliveries. Temporary refuge was given to Hungarian Workers' Party functionaries and ÁVH (Hungarian secret police) officials and their dependants. Apart from the measures aimed to assist the Hungarian communist regime, there were others aimed at the country's own population. There was grave anxiety that unrest might break out among the Hungarian minority in South and East Slovakia. The regime saw with fear the approaching anniversary on October 28 of the emergence of independent Czechoslovakia:

6 Cf. Pernes 2000, 602–604; Blaive 2001, 89–92.

7 Matthews 1998; Pernes op. cit., 606–608; Blaive 2001, 93–95.

8 Pernes 1996, 512–26; Blaive 2001.

9 See Dufek–Šlosar 1994; Bílek–Pilát 1996.

on the eve of the holiday, armoured units were brought up to Prague in case of street protests and tanks took over protection of some public buildings.¹⁰

Most seats of anti-communist resistance had been mercilessly dealt at the beginning of 1950s. Some groups had survived or revived, but most openly anti-communist resistance in Czechoslovakia in 1956 was weak and fragmented among groups out of contact with each other. But some activity grew from the developments in Hungary. The secret police reported from various places increased numbers of “anti-state” leaflets and inscriptions. The grapevine telegraph distributed reports of an imminent reversal. A group of eight attacked an arms dump near Jičín in Eastern Bohemia, but it failed. A group of people prepared to demonstrate in Prague on October 28, believing this could escalate as in Budapest, but the secret police had agents among the conspirators, who were arrested on October 27.¹¹ The secret police liquidated some other clandestine resistance groups in November.

72 The forces active against the Czechoslovak regime remained isolated. High expectations among Czechoslovak exiles in Western Europe gave way in November 1956 to disillusionment, indignation, and a realization that the way back to the native land, which seemed so near to reopening in the dramatic days after October 23, might be closed forever.¹² The overwhelming majority of society remained passive, following the Hungarian events with interest, but more with discomfort than with sympathy. They were anxious that there might be military conflict, breakdown, or food shortages. The public mood was worsened particularly by news of atrocities in the streets of Hungarian cities, a side of events emphasized in the Czechoslovak media.

The propaganda drives aimed at the Hungarian events were by no means awkwardly handled and were quite effective. The media paid intensive attention to the events from the outset, depicting them as a counterrevolution and an orgy of fascist violence. The insurgents were indiscriminately portrayed as *déclassé* elements, hooligans, prostitutes or criminals. The papers published ghastly photographs of lynch victims. Even at the end of 1956, brochures were being published on Hungary’s ostensible counterrevolution, all of them with long print runs. The so-called White Book was promptly translated into Czech and Slovak and edited in several volumes.¹³ Incidentally, a second wave of ’56 publications in Czech and Slovak came in the early 1970s, after the suppression of the Prague Spring had made the earlier

10 Madry 1994, 30.

11 See Pernes 1996, 515.

12 E. g. Goněc 2006; Kosatík 2000, 238.

13 *Kontrarevoluční síly v maďarských říjnových...*

events in Hungary topical again. Works by János Molnár, Ervin Hollós, and János Berecz that were translated and edited offered more sophisticated explanations and apologies than the propaganda that appeared right after the revolution and intervention.¹⁴

It is interesting to compare explanations by Czechoslovak journalists with those found in the translated works. They shared to the utmost the information about street atrocities and associated pictorial material. The same 10 or 15 photographs of lynch victims, executions in Köztársaság tér, and the storming of the Budapest party committee building were repeated. Czechoslovak authors made unobtrusive references to lower living standards in Hungary, remarking, for instance, that Budapest people were more smartly, but less adequately dressed than people in Prague.¹⁵ Above all, their interpretation of events becomes uncompromising, to match a template chosen beforehand. They did not have to reckon with detailed background knowledge among their readers as those catering to the Hungarian public did. While the latter had to admit the initial force came from discontented and misled or mistaken students and youth, with real reactionaries and fascist elements emerging later, in point of fact only after October 28, Czechoslovak authors felt no need to complicate their accounts in that way. For them, it was fascist flotsam and scum who took over the streets from the outset. The *Rudé Právo* correspondent was pretty sure that in the early hours of October 24 (as he allegedly noted in his diary), “Some of the armed men are regular criminals,” and he read at first sight “crimes in many faces of armed men, perhaps even murders”.¹⁶

Ridiculous though such arguments may seem now, they managed at the time to feed people’s feelings of fear, discomfort and condemnation of the violence. The memoirs of Zdeněk Mlynář, later a protagonist in the Prague Spring, give a pregnant account of the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia at the time: “We communists were worried at that time. [...] I obviously do not know how far this may apply to specific individuals who would later represent the stream of reform communists in the CPCz, but as for me, I would be lying if I claimed today that I had only been interested in the political and ideological aspects of the so-called Hungarian events, for apart from those, there was a vivid image of a crowd lynching and hanging communists from lamp posts. And from personal discussions with many communists of various generations, I recall that this occupied them as well.”¹⁷

14 Molnár 1972; Hollós 1972; Berecz 1970.

15 Rossová–Zavřel 1956, 6.

16 Ibid., 25.

17 Mlynář 1978, 52. Similarly, Císař 2005, 434–436.

So fears and worries about violence, breakdown and conflict were not confined to communist minds; they also had a marked influence on Czechoslovak public opinion, enabling the regime to achieve a final pacification of Czechoslovak society. The critical spirit had peaked in the spring of 1956 and been followed by moderation or a halt in development in the summer. The real watershed came at the turn of October and November. The techniques to pacify society included misrepresentations and biased, distorted presentations and perceptions of events in Hungary. Novotný rather wore these techniques out later, but cautious liberalization appeared only at the beginning of the 1960s, after which events in Czechoslovakia picked up remarkable speed, catching many people unprepared.

Reflections on the '56 Hungarian crisis, particularly the Soviet military intervention and the reasons for it, became major considerations for Czechoslovak politicians and journalists during the dramatic developments of the spring and summer of 1968, as Czechoslovakia sought to avert similar use of Soviet tanks. Labelling Dubček the “Czechoslovak Nagy” was part of the standard repertoire of expressions among leaders of the CPCz, who soon began to fear the speed of events and then conspire to bring about military intervention. At the May plenary of the CPCz Central Committee, Alois Indra and Vasil Biľak made comparisons between the current situation in Czechoslovakia and that in Hungary in the autumn of 1956.¹⁸ Dubček was again labelled a “Czechoslovak Nagy” by Vasil Biľak in a speech at the September 1969 Central Committee plenary, which ultimately settled accounts with the Prague Spring.¹⁹ The CPSU representatives and those of other “fraternal parties” mentioned the Hungarian experience repeatedly in criticizing what was happening in Czechoslovakia. János Kádár himself warned his Czechoslovak comrades to avoid at all costs repeating of Imre Nagy’s mistakes, during consultations in Dresden in March 1968, where the CPCz was first subjected to concerted criticism by its allies.²⁰ There were some more apposite references to the '56 experience as well. The fate of Imre Nagy served to show that the Soviets could not be trusted and further escalation of their demands could be expected, it was remarked at the first Central Committee meeting after the party leadership returned from talks in Moscow that led to the signing of the Moscow Protocol on August 28, 1968.²¹

The complexity and importance of reflecting on '56 Hungary in relation to the Prague Spring can be summed up and illustrated by an article entitled “Another

18 Vondrová–Navrátil 2000, 433–434.

19 Ibid., 574.

20 Vondrová–Navrátil 1995, 433 and ff. Cf. Pauer 2004, 40.

21 Vondrová–Navrátil 2001, 133.

anniversary”, published for the tenth anniversary of Imre Nagy’s execution by the enormously popular and influential Writers’ Union weekly *Literární listy*.²² The author, Osvald Machotka, had been press attaché at the Czechoslovak Embassy in Budapest and presented Imre Nagy in a highly positive way, labelling him repeatedly as the precursor of Czechoslovak liberalization and reform. The article, unsurprisingly, aroused deep antagonism in the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP) leadership, especially as it appeared shortly before a scheduled visit by CPCz leaders to Hungary. It was translated into Hungarian and circulated in the confidential bulletin of the Hungarian News Agency MTI. The HSWP Political Committee was also concerned in the latter from a Central Committee secretary, Árpád Pullai, to the then CPCz ideological secretary, Čestmír Císař. Kádár and Jenő Fock both mentioned the article repeatedly during their talks with the Czechoslovak delegation and on other occasions.²³ The CPCz regime made apologies: Dubček and others criticized it repeatedly as an example of media malfunctioning.²⁴ Certain authors have even seen this publication of an article on Imre Nagy’s execution as a decisive factor behind a change in the hitherto more restrained Kádár’s attitude to the Czechoslovak developments. For at the beginning of July 1968, the Hungarian party leadership openly sympathized with the sharply critical approach of other Warsaw Pact countries, and finally joined in the military intervention. However, this seems to be too one-sided an interpretation.

Yet the *Literární listy* article is important evidence of how ’56 was seen in 1968 Czechoslovakia. As said earlier, Machotka had a highly positive opinion of Imre Nagy, whom he criticized only for his inability to restore orders in the streets swiftly and effectively, and on paying too little attention to international diplomatic realities when leaving the Warsaw Pact. The reform politicians within the CPCz administration perceived the 1956 experience in the same way, along with the Czechoslovak public. In other words, they presumed (incorrectly, as we know today) that the decision for the second Soviet intervention in Hungary was taken because of the continuing street terror, whereas the decisive reason for military intervention was Hungary’s proclamation of neutrality.

That was exactly the mistake the leading CPCz reformers did not want to commit. Their unshakable loyalty in international politics towards the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was to become the hallmark of their foreign policy, thereby ensuring room to carry out the necessary economic and political reforms in safety. Based

22 *Literární listy* 16: 13 (1968).

23 Vondrová–Navrátil 2000, 249–251.

24 *Ibid.*, 205 and 241.

on that logic, the CPCz regime did not even attempt to seek international support against the mounting Soviet pressure, apart from more or less inoffensive coquetry with Yugoslavia and Romania, aimed in any case to calm domestic opinion and largely meaningless in reality. The peace in the streets of Czechoslovak cities in the summer of 1968 gave a false illusion of security, allowing it to be thought that the massive military preparations around the Czechoslovak borders were just attempted political and psychological constraints. If there was no counter-revolution, there was no need to organize military intervention.

When Dubček gave his emotional report to the CPCz Politburo on the night of August 21, he probably still could not believe that the Soviets had acted as they did because of him: that was the logical conclusion from his false premises about the Soviet moods, calculations and decisions. But hundreds of thousands of Czechs and Slovaks shared the same illusion as they besieged the Soviet tanks in the streets on August 21, 1968, attempting to explain to the Soviet soldiers that they had blundered: “Why have you come? There is no counterrevolution here!”

The notions—or rather distorted and mistaken interpretations—of what had happened in Hungary in that autumn of 1956 played a relatively important role in how events developed in neighbouring Czechoslovakia. The regime’s propaganda succeeded in convincing the Czechoslovak public, at least partially, that the Hungarian events had been, above all, an eruption of uncontrolled violence and street atrocities. The shock this gave to the Czechoslovak public made it a relatively simple matter for a virtually unchanged, still Stalinist leadership to regain full control of the situation. The dawn of half-hearted liberalization was postponed for several years. 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berecz 1970.

JÁNOS BEREZC: *Kontrarevoluce perem a zbrani 1956* (Praha: Svoboda, 1970).

Bílek–Pilát 1996.

JIRÍ BÍLEK–VLADIMÍR PILÁT: Bezprostřední reakce československý politických a vojenských orgánů na povstání v Maďarsku, *Soudobé Dějiny* 4 (1996).

Blaive 2001.

MURIEL BLAIVE: *Promarněná příležitost. Českoslovenko a rok 1956* (Praha: Prostor, 2001).

Císař 2005.

ČESTMÍR CÍSAŘ: *Paměti. Nejen o zákuslísi Pražského jara* (Praha: SinCon, 2005).

Dufek–Šlosar 1994.

JIRÍ DUFEK–VLADIMÍR ŠLOSAR: Rekonstrukce čs. vojenských opatření na čs.-maďarských hranicích, in: Jirí Bílek (ed.): *Vojenská opatření Československa v souvislosti s maďarským povstáním 1956* (Praha: Historický ústav Armády české republiky, 1994).

Goněc 2006.

VLADIMÍR GONĚC: Československý exil ve vztahu k maďarskému exilu a maďarské revoluci 1956, in: V. Goněc–R. Vlček (eds.): *Z dějin visegrádského prostoru*. (Brno: Vydavatelství MU, 2006).

Hollós 1972.

ERVIN HOLLÓS: *Kdo byli a co chtěli?* (Praha: Svoboda, 1972).

Kaplan 1993.

KAREL KAPLAN: *Sociální souvislosti krizí komunistického režimu 1953–1957 a 1968–1975* (Praha: ÚSD, 1993).

Kaplan 1996.

KAREL KAPLAN: Die Ereignisse des Jahres 1956 in der Tschechoslowakei, in: H. Hahn–H. Olschowski (eds.): *Das Jahr 1956 in Ostmitteleuropa*. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1996).

Kontrarevoluční síly v maďarských říjnových událostech, I–III (Praha, 1956).

Kontrarevoluční spiknutí Imre Nagye a jeho společníků (Praha, 1958).

Kosatík 2000.

PAVEL KOSATÍK: *Ferdinand Peroutka: pozdější život 1938–1978* (Praha: Paseka, 2000).

Madry 1994.

JINDŘICH MADRY: Reflexe maďarského povstání v jednání ústředních politických orgánů Československa, in: J. Bílek (ed.): *Vojenská opatření Československa v souvislosti s maďarským povstáním 1956*. (Praha: Historický ústav Armády české republiky, 1994).

Matthews 1998.

JOHN P. C. MATTHEWS: Majales: the abortive student revolt in Czechoslovakia in 1956, *CWIHP Working Paper No. 24*, (Washington DC, 1998).

Mlynář 1978.

ZDENĚK MLYNÁŘ: *Mráz přichází z Kremlu* (Köln: Index, 1978).

Molnár 1972.

JÁNOS MOLNÁR: *Kontrarevolúcia v Maďarsku roku 1956* (Bratislava, 1972).

Pauer 2004.

JAN PAUER: *Praha 1968. Vpád varšavské smlouvy* (Praha: Argo, 2004).

Pernes 1996.

JIRÍ PERNES: Ohlas maďarské revoluce roku 1956 v československé veřejnosti. Z interních hlášení krajských správ ministerstva vnitra, *Soudobé Dějiny* 4: 512–526 (1996).

Pernes 2000.

JIRÍ PERNES: Československý rok 1956. K dějinám destalinizace v československu, *Soudobé Dějiny* 7 (2000).

Rossová–Zavřel 1956.

ANNA ROSSOVÁ–LUDVÍK ZAVŘEL: *Viděli jsme kontrarevoluci v Maďarsku* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury, 1956).

Rupnik 1996.

JACQUES RUPNIK: Promeškané setkání. Rok 1956 v pohledu z Prahy, *Soudobé Dějiny* 3 (1996).

78

Vondrová–Navrátil 1995.

JITKA VONDROVÁ–JAROMÍR NAVRÁTIL (eds.): *Mezinárodní souvislosti československé krize 1967–1970* (Brno: Doplněk, 1995).

Vondrová–Navrátil 2000.

JITKA VONDROVÁ–JAROMÍR NAVRÁTIL (eds.): *Komunistická strana Československa: Konsolidace (květen srpen 1968)* (Praha–Brno: ÚSD–Doplněk, 2000).

Vondrová–Navrátil 2001.

JITKA VONDROVÁ–JAROMÍR NAVRÁTIL (eds.): *Komunistická strana Československa: Kapitulace (srpen listopad 1968)* (Praha–Brno: ÚSD–Doplněk, 2001).