

HUNGARY AND THE USSR, 1956-1988

Kadar's Political Leadership

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Power Struggle in the Hungarian Communist Party in the Mid-1950s

By the mid-1950s it became apparent that Stalinist absolutism without Stalin no longer worked, either in the Soviet Union or in the satellites. In Hungary, ever since the appointment of Imre Nagy, Rakosi's leadership was losing momentum. Even after Nagy's removal, Rakosi's critics, especially the Communist intellectuals, could not be silenced.

In early 1956, the general public found out indirectly that prominent Hungarian intellectuals had already challenged Rakosi in Party forums. Although the critical "Memorandum" which had been signed by the intellectuals and submitted to the Central Committee was not published, the Irodalmi Ujsag (Literary Journal) printed a Rakosi-sponsored resolution that condemned "certain" intellectuals for deviating from the established Party line and thus violating the Party discipline. The long list of "guilty" individuals made the Hungarians aware of the extent of dissent and of the involvement of prominent writers, journalists, poets, actors, directors and musicians.

Most of these dissenters rallied around the "retired" Imre Nagy and demanded the revival of Nagy's more moderate programs. While this group of intellectuals skirmished with Rakosi, other Communists,

those recently released from prison, emerged on the scene. While many of them did not join the pro-Nagy forces, their hatred of Rakosi certainly matched that of the writers. The most prominent among the re-emerging prisoners was Janos Kadar.

Kadar was imprisoned from May 1951 to July 1954.² He had been charged with complicity with Rajk and also with the 1943 dissolution of the then illegal Communist Party, which played into the hands of the British secret service. His trial was held *in camera*, and information about it has been made available by a fellow prisoner who had been used as a witness against him. Actually, Kadar received a relatively mild sentence: four years of imprisonment. It has been alleged that he was mercilessly tortured by the secret police, but this was neither confirmed nor denied by Kadar himself.³

A fellow prisoner, Bela Szasz, reported soon after his own release that he was seated next to a "ravaged" Janos Kadar in the waiting room of a special sanatorium for Party officials. Kadar told Szasz during that brief encounter that after his arrest he had been tortured by Gabor Peter's henchmen, but after his sentencing he had not been badly treated and had received decent though insufficient food. He had been placed in solitary confinement and spent his time reading and rereading the books of the modest prison library. Kadar further related to Szasz that during his imprisonment he continuously beseeched Matyas Rakosi with petitions asserting his innocence. But his letters were intercepted, and only after the arrest of Peter did they reach Rakosi. According to Szasz, Kadar believed that Rakosi was responsible for his release. After he was released, Rakosi arranged an interview with him to inquire about Kadar's plans. Reportedly, Kadar told Rakosi that he had only two professions to choose from, for he was competent in nothing else. He could either return to his original trade and become a manual worker, or he could do Party work. Rakosi assured Kadar that the Party needed him. Szasz, in his recollection of the meeting, questioned the naivete of Kadar: "Was Janos Kadar the only man in Hungary ignorant of the fact that 'Comrade Stalin's best Hungarian disciple' had been the Budapest director and puppet master of all important show trials?"⁴

In 1954 Kadar was reinstated into the Party and was appointed secretary of Budapest's Thirteenth District--a far cry from his previous assignments. During the Rakosi-Nagy confrontations, Kadar quietly worked within his district organization, not taking sides. On September 5,

1955, he was promoted to head the Party organization of Pest County.⁵ As in the past, Kadar remained practically unknown and unnoticed outside Party circles; as long as the power rested with Rakosi, other Communists played only supporting roles.

Only a few other Hungarian Communists were known to the general public. Erno Gero had become known for his abilities to rebuild Hungary's ruined transportation system, most notably the bridges between Buda and Pest. He was hailed as the "bridge builder." Zoltan Vas, the first Communist mayor of Budapest, was remembered as the "savior" of the starving city and later as the "economic tsar" of the country. Mihaly Farkas' name had become synonymous with terror, and Jozsef Revai had been identified as the ideological spokesman of the Party. Imre Nagy had some initial public recognition in connection with the land reforms, but even then he was overshadowed by Marshal Voroshilov, chairman of the Allied Control Commission. As it was shown above, Nagy was propelled into public attention only after 1953, when the Soviet leaders nominated him for the premiership. There was only one home-Communist whom the Hungarians could readily identify, Laszlo Rajk. He had received public notoriety for his zealous prosecution of "reactionaries," that is, enemies or potential enemies of the Party: the Smallholders, the right-wing Socialists and Cardinal Mindszenty.

In the mid-1950s, the Communist antagonists of Rakosi used Rajk's execution as a point of departure for building a case against Rakosi. The general public watched with disbelief the ensuing intra-Party struggle. Public opinion sided with forces that opposed the despised Rakosi. The impetus for an outright confrontation with Rakosi came from Moscow. Khrushchev's "secret" speech, at the end of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held on February 24 and 25, 1956, stirred up long repressed anti-Soviet feelings in the satellites.⁶ On March 12 and 13, 1956, Rakosi made his official report to the Central Committee of the Party on the recent decisions of the 20th Congress. The Hungarian leadership, as in⁷ the past, fully concurred with the Soviet Communist Party.

Although the cult of Stalinism had already been played down, Khrushchev's direct attack on Stalin took the Central Committee by surprise. Rakosi himself had no prior knowledge of these developments, and just before leaving for Moscow he was preparing for a showdown with the defiant intellectuals. While the Soviet leaders, Khrushchev, Mikoyan, Suslov, Kaganovich and Malenkov were

tearing down the image of an infallible Stalin, the Hungarian writers and other opponents of Rakosi were concentrating their efforts on bringing down "Stalin's best Hungarian disciple." Rakosi attempted to keep the details of Khrushchev's "secret" speech from the Hungarians, but the Western media widely publicized the complete text. From Rakosi's point of view, even Pravda, which was printing attacks on Stalin, had become a subversive newspaper. Despite Rakosi's efforts, by March 1956, everybody in Hungary knew that the Soviet Union was setting out on a new course and that changes in Hungary were imminent.

On March 17, 1956, the Petofi Circle, a discussion group of university students, held its first public meeting. This was an offshoot of DISZ, the Hungarian Young Communist League. The organization was named after Sandor Petofi, who, as noted in Chapter 2, had been Hungary's most revered national poet, one of the prime organizers of the March 15, 1848, anti-Habsburg rebellion, who died in battle while fighting against the invading armies of Tsar Nicholas I. This society, as it turned out, provided a forum for Communist intellectuals and innocent victims of Stalinism to speak up against the injustices of the recent past. The first few discussions of the group were innocuous and were presided over by high-ranking Party officials. Gyorgy Lukacs, the internationally renowned Marxist philosopher, sparked the first serious controversy during his presentation on Marxist aesthetics, when he attacked Stalinist cultural policies and exhorted his young audience to be independent thinkers and not to rely on continuous quotations of Stalin or even Lenin.

In the meantime, at a relatively insignificant meeting of local Party activists in Heves County, located in Northern Hungary, Rakosi announced that the Rajk trial was based on provocation and the victims had already been rehabilitated. But this token rehabilitation did not satisfy Rajk's widow, Julia Rajk, who herself had just spent five years in Rakosi's prisons. She appeared as one of the surprise speakers at the June 18, 1956, meeting of the Petofi Circle. At that time, veteran Party activists, World War II partisans and pre-World War II illegal underground Communist organizers were invited to share their past experiences with the young people.¹⁰ Julia Rajk unequivocally declared war on Rakosi when she said, "Murderers should not be criticized--they should be punished. I shall never rest until those who have ruined the country, corrupted the Party, destroyed thousands and driven millions into despair receive just

punishment. Comrades, help me in this struggle!"¹¹ Her statement was met with loud cheers. This, of course, was provocation, but by June 1956 even Rakosi did not dare to move against the speaker. Rather, he prepared an attack on the Petofi Circle and its organizers.

The last meeting of the ever more popular Petofi Circle was held on June 27. The role of the press was on the agenda. The crowd was overflowing from the huge auditorium to the neighboring streets. Popular writers addressed the group and they went beyond attacking the "cult of personality" when they proposed the "immediate structural changes of the system."¹² The last speaker, Geza Losonczy, demanded the readmission of Imre Nagy to the Party. The huge crowd loudly cheered and hailed the former prime minister.¹³

On June 28, 1956, anti-Communist demonstrations erupted in Poznan, Poland.¹⁴ This event played into Rakosi's hands, as he scared his fellow Communist leaders with the possibility of an international conspiracy. Thus on June 30, at the Central Committee's meeting, he demanded the condemnation and punishment of the participants in the Petofi Circle discussions for their anti-Party and anti-regime manifestations. Rakosi's success was limited; the Petofi Circle was condemned and its activities were suspended, but the group was not abolished. The most outspoken critic at the June 27 debate, Tibor Dery, was expelled from the Party, which, in comparison with past Stalinist practices, was very mild punishment. Imre Nagy, although not directly involved, became the target of Rakosi's campaign.

To prevent a Poznan-like outbreak in Hungary, Rakosi prepared a list of 400 people to be arrested. He also wanted to suspend the Irodalmi Ujsag, the journal of the Writers' Union, for inciting the public. But Rakosi's plans were never carried out due to direct Soviet interference. On July 17, 1956, the Soviet Politburo's troubleshooter, Anastas Mikoyan, arrived unexpectedly in Hungary and showed up at the meeting of the Hungarian Politburo, which was already in progress. After listening to Rakosi's arguments on how to deal with the "revisionists," Mikoyan conveyed the wishes of the Soviet Presidium, which was the replacement of Matyas Rakosi with Erno Gero as first secretary of the Party. Rakosi tried a direct appeal to¹⁵ the Kremlin but evidently Khrushchev turned him down.

Rakosi's rule in Hungary no longer served the purposes of the Kremlin. His Yugoslav antagonist, Tito, was not willing to resume relations with Hungary until Rakosi was removed from office. But, according to Tito

himself, the Soviet leaders as late as June 1956 "knew of no one else on whom they could rely in Hungary."¹⁶ The selection of Gero was a stopgap measure. Moscow was looking for a better balanced team. The Kremlin, unlike the Hungarian Communists, did not completely reject the possibility of reinstating Imre Nagy.

From Hungary, Mikoyan flew to Yugoslavia to brief Tito about the changes in Hungary. On July 21, on his return trip to Moscow, Mikoyan stopped over in Hungary and paid a visit to Imre Nagy. At that time he advised Gero to bring Nagy back into the Party.¹⁷ By supporting Nagy, the Soviet Union wanted to heal the rift within the Party and prevent Gero from attaining Rakosi-like unlimited power. For similar reasons, the Soviets insisted on the promotion of Janos Kadar and Gyorgy Marosan.

At the July 18 through 21, 1956 meeting of the full Central Committee, the decisions of the Politburo, that is, the Soviet proposals, were ratified. The "leftist sectarian mistakes" of the Rakosi regime were condemned as well as "right-wing revisionist tendencies" in the Party. Rakosi was excused from his Party office, and Farkas was expelled from the Party. Gero was duly elected first secretary of the Central Committee; Kadar and Marosan were brought into the top leadership as members of the Politburo. Kadar was also named secretary of the Central Committee.¹⁸ Only on Nagy's readmission did the Hungarian leadership balk. Although procedures were initiated to readmit him, Kadar, who was now second in command to Gero, kept insisting on Nagy's "self-criticism" and admission of mistakes as a condition of his reinstatement. But Nagy was not ready to repent, even after the urging of Soviet Ambassador Yuri V. Andropov.¹⁹

The replacement of Rakosi by Gero did not signal a substantial change. The Hungarians did not attribute much significance to the elevation of Kadar and Marosan. As long as Nagy was kept out of the Party, a large segment of the Party, mostly the intellectuals, remained dissatisfied. The writers, journalists and artists, supported by university students, not only wanted to see Nagy in the Party but were pushing for overall reforms. They kept proving the limits of their ability to criticize.

The Party was visibly on the retreat, and the critics were forging ahead. Critical articles appeared in the Szabad Nep, the Party's official daily newspaper; in the Irodalmi Ujsag, the journal of the Writers' Union; and in the newly published weekly, the Hetfoi Hirlap,

(Monday's News). The circulation of Irodalmi Ujsag jumped from 8000-10,000 to 30,000 within months, and more copies could have been sold had the Party authorized the use of more paper.²⁰ The writers, among other things, wanted justice to be done in the Rajk affair. They advocated Rajk's reinterment with full honors, and the punishment of Farkas and Rakosi. The Writers' Union, at its September 17 meeting, staged a pro-Imre Nagy demonstration.²¹

During this period, the Party leadership concentrated its efforts on re-establishing normal relations with Yugoslavia. In September, a week long trade negotiation was concluded in Belgrade, but the real breakthrough occurred during the first days of October, in Yalta, where Khrushchev managed to bring together the vacationing Tito with the visiting Gero. At the same time, to appease Tito and also to placate the critical Communist intellectuals, the Central Committee announced that on October 6 the "martyred Rajk" and three other innocently executed Communists would be reinterred with full honors in the Kerepesi National Cemetery where many of the country's greatest patriots had been laid to rest.²²

October 6 has been a national day of mourning since 1849, marking the execution of thirteen generals in the War of Independence of 1848-1849. On that date in 1956, despite the pouring rain, thousands came to pay tribute to the Communist "martyrs" and to protest symbolically against the injustices of the Rakosi era. In the cemetery, in front of the Kossuth mausoleum, Rajk's widow and her young son stood next to the coffins; near them, with bared heads, stood Rajk's old friends, members of the Communist underground, fellow prisoners, co-workers, writers, artists and Imre Nagy. Ferenc Munnich, an old Muscovite who had been sidelined by Rakosi, and Antal Apro, an opportunist, were the official representatives of the Party. In his eulogy, Munnich promised a return to "Socialist legality and to Socialist humanism . . . :²³ There shall never again be Rajk trials in Hungary. Apro, who had been a supporter of Rakosi until July, now pledged the Party's guarantee that infringements of the law would not reoccur. A fellow prisoner of Rajk, the writer Bela Szasz, was able to capture the true spirit of the event when he said:

Trumped-up charges and the gallows threw Laszlo Rajk into an unmarked grave for seven years, but today his death looms like a warning symbol before the Hungarian people and the world. For when thousand upon thousand pass before

these coffins, it is not only to pay the victims the last honors; it is their passionate desire, their irrevocable resolution to bury an epoch, to bury forever lawlessness, tyranny and the Hungarian disciples of iron-fisted rule: the moral deed of the shameful years.²⁴

The huge crowd filed past the coffins in silent dignity. Concurrently, disturbances were reported in Buda at the Batthyany memorial, where a large young crowd paid its respects to the real martyr of Hungarian independence, the first premier of the 1848 uprising.

As these events were unfolding, the Party's top leaders, Gero and Kadar, were in Moscow, meeting with Mikoyan and Suslov.²⁵ It should be noted that while Gero had been meeting with Tito in Crimea, Kadar had led a Hungarian delegation to Peking, to the 8th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese leaders paid special attention to Kadar, who was viewed as an upcoming star of the Hungarian Party hierarchy. Kadar was received by Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai and other dignitaries. The Chinese leaders were interested in Kadar's imprisonment, and they also wanted to know his views on the current situation in Hungary. Kadar was pleased with the reception and wanted to find out more about Mao's new Hundred Flowers Movement. Mao's slogan, "Let hundred flowers bloom, let hundred schools of thought contend," had already been circulating among the Hungarian Communists. After this successful visit to China, Kadar rejoined Gero in Moscow and they returned to Hungary together.²⁶

Soon after the delegation's return from Moscow, the Hungarian Consulate in Belgrade was upgraded to full embassy status, as a meaningful step towards improved relations. While the leadership was preoccupied with Yugoslavia, dissent was spreading throughout the country. The Petofi Circle resumed its activities and held debates on more and more controversial subjects. On October 13, 1956, to appease the critics, the arrest of Mihaly Farkas was announced by the authorities. On October 15, ignoring the increasing domestic protests, Gero along with a top-level Communist delegation departed for Yugoslavia.²⁷

By that time the criticism had sharpened and spread from the writers to the university students. In mid-October, the students insisted on forming their own organization separate from the DISZ, the all encompassing Communist Youth Organization. Also, other debating societies on the model of the Petofi Circle sprang up at university campuses throughout the country. Until

October 20, 1956, these organizations had been at least nominally affiliated with the DISZ, but on that date, the MEFESZ, the Hungarian University Youth Association, an independent nationwide student group, held its organizational meeting in Szeged, a city in Eastern Hungary. At that meeting, somewhat vague demands for changing the system were voiced. The election of a new government and Party leadership were advocated, and also demands for the withdrawal of Soviet troops were noted.²⁸ The life span of the MEFESZ was four days; after October 23, it was hardly ever mentioned. However, it succeeded in mobilizing the students on October 23, for a pro-Polish mass demonstration that mushroomed into a full-scale anti-Soviet and anti-Communist uprising.

As the cleavage within the Party became obvious, the Hungarians began to rally to the side of the anti-Stalinists. At "authorized discussions," the most vocal Communist critics of Rakosi were applauded the loudest by the increasing audiences. The open criticism of "crimes against Socialist legality" became code words for holding the culprits, that is Rakosi and his fellow Stalinists, responsible for their abuses.

The Communist critics of the Stalinists were greatly encouraged by the apparent broad public support, and the public was heartened by the critics' expression of many other long repressed grievances. The most amazing occurrence was that after years of terror even the most outspoken remained unharmed. After Khrushchev's "secret" speech, all Hungarian Stalinists were on the defensive. Only a few Hungarian Communists were aware of the exact content of the "secret" speech. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1956 it was clear to most Hungarians that important changes were in the making. Even the most reform-minded Communists were unaware of the extent of national discontent with the entire Communist system and with the Soviet domination of Hungary.