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Journey to a Revolution

*A Personal Memoir and History
of the
Hungarian Revolution
of 1956*

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The Idol with Feet of Clay

Few things stand out less clearly at the time than a turning point in history, at any rate when one is living through it. As a rule it is only in retrospect that an event can be seen clearly as a turning point. Historians write as if they were looking at the past in the rearview mirror of a moving car; and, of course, picking the “turning points” of history is something of a specialty for many historians—in some cases, the more obscure, the better. Turning points, however, are much harder to recognize as they occur, when one is looking ahead through the windshield.

To take an example, we now recognize that the Battle of Britain was a turning point in World War II—fewer than 2,000 young fighter pilots of the Royal Air Force handed Hitler his first defeat, and ensured that whatever else was going to happen in 1940, Great Britain would not be invaded—but those who lived through the Battle of Britain day by day did not perceive it as a decisive, clear-cut event. The fighter pilots were too exhausted and battle-weary to care; and the public, while buoyed by the victories of the R.A.F. in the sky over southern England,

was still struggling to come to grips with the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk and the collapse of France, and would soon be plunged into the first stages of what later came to be known as the blitz. Those who—as children—saw the white contrails of the aircraft swirling overhead in the blue summer sky, or watched the shiny brass cartridge cases come tumbling down by the thousands, had no sense of being witnesses to a “turning point”; nor did their elders. It was only much later that this turning point began to be perceived as one, and that Battle of Britain Day was added to the list of annual British patriotic celebrations.

In much the same way, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, while it was clearly a major event, was not perceived as a turning point in history until much later, when the unexpected disintegration of the Soviet empire in eastern Europe, followed very shortly by the total collapse of the Soviet Union itself, could be traced back to the consequences of the uprising in the streets of Budapest.

The three weeks of the Hungarian Revolution ended, of course, in a victory for the Soviet Union, as everybody knows, but not since Pyrrhus himself has there been so Pyrrhic a victory. The Hungarians had chipped the first crack in the imposing facade of Stalinist communism and had exposed the Soviet Union's domination of eastern Europe for the brutal sham it was. For the first time, people in the West—even those on the left—had seen the true face of Soviet power, and it shocked them.

The Hungarians lost, but in the long run the Russians lost more. Communism became much harder to sell as a humane alternative to capitalism (or to western European democratic socialism); and the Russians themselves, badly shaken by the size and the ferocity of the uprising they had put down with such

overwhelming force, and dismayed by the attention it received in the world's media, never attempted to repeat the experience in Europe. From time to time, the tanks might be sent rumbling into the streets again, as they were in Prague in 1968, but they would not henceforth open fire on civilians. Without apparently having given the matter much thought, the Russians discarded the trump card in their hand: the belief on the part of eastern Europeans that the Red Army would shoot them down mercilessly if they rose against the puppet governments the Soviet Union had imposed on them at the end of World War II.

More dangerous still, those governments themselves, whose ultimate legitimacy rested on the threat of armed intervention by the Soviet Union, ceased to believe that it would ever intervene again to support them with force the way it did in Hungary in 1956—and if the Russians would not, then how, when push came to shove, were the “people's governments” of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania to remain in power over the long haul?

This is always a serious problem of empire, by no means limited to the Soviet Union. In 1919, the United Kingdom used violence, albeit on a considerably smaller scale, against the congress party in India when General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on demonstrators in Amritsar, killing 379 of them at Jallianwallah Bagh, and wounding perhaps three times as many. The massacre horrified the British—except for the impenitent General Dyer and his supporters—and the result was an increasing reluctance on the part of the British government to use force against the congress party at all. In consequence, the threat of armed violence—one of the pillars on which the raj stood—gradually became more and more remote and unlikely. The Indians ceased to fear it, the

British grew increasingly unwilling to use it on a large scale, and independence for India thus became only a matter of time.

In much the same way, the Hungarians' uprising against their own unpopular government and the government's Soviet masters, while it failed, fatally shook the confidence of the Soviet government in its ability to control the countries of eastern Europe—a confidence that had already been weakened by Stalin's death, by the increasingly (and defiantly) independent attitude of Tito's Yugoslavia, and by the widening ideological rift between the Russian and the Chinese communist parties.

After 1956, the Soviet Union found itself in an increasingly uncomfortable and ambivalent position vis-à-vis the eastern European "people's democracies," since the Soviet leadership was desperately trying to dismantle the remnants of Stalinism at home and bring about a "thaw" in Russian life, while at the same time continuing to prop up unrepentantly Stalinist leaders in the Soviet Union's client states. In the Politburo there was a dawning realization that the Soviet Union was in a race against time to create a viable consumer economy while still maintaining and modernizing its huge armed forces, as well as to allow a greater degree of freedom of expression than had been thinkable under Stalin without altogether losing the party's ultimate control of the media.

This was a tricky balancing act for Stalin's contentious heirs, akin to a herd of elephants trying to walk a tightrope. While performing this miracle, the members of the Politburo did not want their attention to be diverted toward the "satellite countries," as the eastern European communist regimes were called in the West, or the "fraternal socialist countries," as they were called in the Soviet Union. It was the job of the eastern European leaders to maintain discipline and order in their countries—in short,

to keep everything frozen, "on ice"—a job which was by no means easy to do when the Soviet Union itself was experimenting, however gingerly, with a thaw.

It was the unhappy lot of the Hungarians in 1956 to be the first people to seriously challenge Russian hegemony in eastern Europe—not just to challenge it intellectually, or with speeches, which was already dangerous enough, but to challenge it with armed force. The Russians' response was instinctive, brutal, and violent—in effect, to do exactly what Stalin would have done—but cruel and harsh as the suppression of the Hungarian rebellion was, it was not followed by the kind of widespread terror that would have come naturally to Stalin. Certainly, many Hungarians were shot, and many more imprisoned, but there were no mass repressions, no transfers of population to the gulags or to remote parts of the Soviet empire, no attempts to wipe out whole sections of the population.

Quite apart from the reluctance of the Soviet leadership to carry out such a program, two things had occurred that nobody had foreseen, both of which stemmed from the fact that Hungary has a common border with Austria and with what was then West Germany. One occurrence was that from the moment the Hungarian Revolution broke out it became possible to enter Hungary quite freely, with the result that this was the first event of its kind to be covered in detail from the beginning by reporters, television cameramen, and photographers from all over the world. Few historical events, in fact, have ever produced more copy and pictures than the Hungarian Revolution, and the pages of *Life*, *Paris-Match*, and *Stern* (and their counterparts all over the world) brought the revolution home to readers in searing and unforgettable images, none of them likely to create goodwill for the Soviet Union.

The second was that the open frontiers with the West made

it possible for large numbers of Hungarians to leave once it was clear that the revolution had failed—whole classes of people whom Stalin would have had shot or sent to the gulags simply walked across the frontier into Austria or West Germany, and from there moved on to the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. This Hungarian diaspora was not unlike the flight of educated, upper-middle-class Cubans to Miami after Castro seized power.

Hitherto, accounts of Soviet repression had been anecdotal, and many people on the left didn't believe them. The Chechens had been shipped in cattle cars in midwinter to exile in Siberia without their suffering having been recorded by photographers for *Life*, by cameramen for the network news shows, or by best-selling novelists; the gulags were out of sight (as well as, for most people in the West, out of mind); the murder of millions of kulaks during the collectivization process went undocumented; in short, the worst of Stalin's crimes had gone unseen and had left almost no record. But Budapest was full of eyewitnesses, and events there were on the nightly news and the front pages in the West, impossible to ignore. Not only that; all this was, from the point of view of the press, "great stuff": burning buildings; tanks blown up by heroic schoolchildren with Molotov cocktails; weeping, wounded babies in the hospitals; students fighting the Red Army in the streets. These events were perfectly calculated to make "news," like something out of the pages of Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*. Here was everything Lord Copper could have wanted—heroism in the streets, the release of an imprisoned cardinal, the secret police shot down by angry civilians, and beautiful girls cradling submachine guns.

The hapless Russians were caught in the full glare of the Western news machine, blinking in the face of flashbulbs and growling

with rage, like an adulterous husband caught in flagrante delicto by the Fleet Street press corps. As if that were not bad enough, the great numbers of Hungarians who escaped after the revolution—and who were speedily settled in the West, to assuage Westerners' guilt for not having intervened in or supported the revolution—kept the event alive in people's imagination for many years; so, unlike most news stories, this one did not fade quickly from people's minds. People had seen, with their own eyes, what Soviet repression was like; it was not quickly forgotten on either side of the Iron Curtain; and great sympathy was extended to those who had survived and escaped it.

When Talleyrand was told the news of Napoleon's execution of the duke d'Enghien and asked what he thought of what was then regarded by many people as a state crime, he replied, "It is worse than a crime—it is a blunder."

Much the same can be said of the Hungarian Revolution. It was a blunder of historic proportions on the part of the Soviet Union. The initial demands of the Hungarians could have been met, perhaps not totally, but partially—certainly enough to restore order. "Socialism with a human face," as it was later called, could have been put in place in Hungary and might have spread to the rest of the Soviet Union's eastern European empire, and the Warsaw Pact could have been turned into a genuine alliance. Instead, the governments of the people's democracies, for their own survival, were obliged to tighten the screws on their own people. The mailed fist was henceforth the only official political answer to any problem; and it became clear, even to those who had not hitherto been willing to believe it, that the only way forward to a better life would require the destruction of the whole communist system, and the complete removal of Russian armed forces from eastern Europe.



Jack Esten/Cehy Images

The authentic face of Soviet communism: a Russian senior officer, unfastening his pistol holster, approaches Western newsmen.

An account of that event—undoubtedly a turning point in the full meaning of the phrase—seems appropriate fifty years after it occurred, when we can see, quite clearly, to borrow the words of Winston Churchill, that while it was not the end, or even the beginning of the end, it was, perhaps, the end of the beginning. The uprising in Budapest in October 1956 marked the first and most significant failure of the Soviet Union in its hard-won role as the dominant power in eastern Europe, as well as a monumental public failure in foreign relations (and public relations) for the heirs of Stalin. After 1956, Soviet policy in eastern Europe seesawed between timid attempts to soften the grasp of the party and the police, and to allow each country a little more freedom in terms of its own special historical institutions and values—for example, not trying too hard to eliminate private farming in Hungary, or turning a blind eye to the role of the Catholic church in Poland—and halfhearted threats of force, which achieved little except to keep alive the feeling among eastern Europeans that the Soviet Union, communism, and the Red Army were their enemies, and that their own governments were merely collaborationists and traitors.

This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that from the point of view of the Russians, the eastern Europeans, to paraphrase Harold Macmillan, “never had it so good.” However grim, grimy, and impoverished life might seem to Western visitors in Prague, East Berlin, Budapest, or Warsaw, it was a good deal better than life in Moscow or Leningrad, let alone in the more remote industrial cities in the Soviet Union. The fact that agriculture had been only halfheartedly collectivized in the eastern European countries led to a greater abundance of food; besides, the eastern European countries had not experienced the full horrors of Leninism and Stalinism from 1917 on. Most of them still had a substantial edu-

cated middle class, however much it was shorn of political rights and property, and some tradition of bourgeois democracy. The party might try to discourage religious belief, but the churches had not been eradicated any more than the peasants had been turned into *kolkhozniki* (collective farmers). From the Russian point of view, the countries of eastern Europe had nothing to complain about. This made it all the more irritating that they did nothing but complain.

Worse, the increasing inability of the Soviet Union to hold its satellite states down and impose orthodox Stalinist-Leninist politics on them—the realization that nothing but brute force, brutally applied, could prevent the Hungarians and the Czechs from moving toward a free market economy; or the Poles from going to church and forming independent labor unions; or the East Germans from trying to escape to West Germany despite the Wall; or the Romanians from hating the ruling Ceaușescu family—eventually forced the Soviet Union to relax its hold on eastern Europe. Even a world power could do only so many things at once. The Russians were trapped in an extravagantly expensive arms race with the United States; sponsoring revolutions as far abroad as Central America and Africa; supporting a host of Middle Eastern “clients”; attempting to suppress rebellion in Georgia, Afghanistan, and most of their own southern border republics; and competing with the increasingly obdurate Chinese for leadership of the communist world. The Russians’ economy was hopelessly overcentralized; their industrial base, except when it came to military production, was antiquated; agricultural production was declining; and the Russians themselves, in the dawning new age of satellite television and personal computers, were for the first time exposed to the temptations of the Western consumer economy—temptations which the planners

in the Politburo were unable to stifle or to satisfy. The Soviet Union was thus in no position to use force in eastern Europe, even had it wanted to; and as the Soviet army bogged down in Afghanistan—the Russian equivalent of America's involvement in Vietnam—even confidence in the army began to wane. The Soviet Union was not yet a paper tiger, but it was in the process of becoming one, and its troops in the eastern European countries began to be pitied rather than feared.

It was Gorbachev's great and fatal miscalculation to assume that he could allow the eastern European countries to give up communism yet still preserve it at home. In fact, the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union's client states inevitably led to its swift disappearance in Russia as well. The system collapsed like a house of cards, with a swiftness that astonished everyone.

The Hungarians had been the first to grasp that the idol had feet of clay, and the first to try to destroy it—the toppling of Stalin's huge statue in Budapest in October 1956 was deeply symbolic—but the Russians, having suppressed the Hungarian Revolution, failed to learn a lesson from the experience. They expanded their role as a world power—a nuclear superpower, competing with the United States all over the world—without trying to solve the problems (or, in Marxist terms, the “contradictions”) in their own backyard; and eventually ferment and dissent close to home fatally undercut the regime. It took twenty-five years for the Hungarians to win the battle they had begun (and lost) in October 1956, but in the end they did win. As Russians said to each other, with bitter irony, in 1988, while Soviet institutions collapsed around them, paraphrasing a favorite communist slogan, “For seventy years we have been on the road to nowhere.”

This book will try to explain first of all how the Hungarian Revolution came about, and, of necessity, to explain to the reader how Hungary came to be in the position it was in as of 1956; and then to trace the events of 1956 both as history and in terms of my own experience there (which will likewise require a bit of explanation).

Like most significant historical events, the Hungarian Revolution did not take place by accident or in a vacuum; but neither was it carefully planned, as the Russians wanted the world to believe. In retrospect, of course, all things—or most of them—are clear, but the various strands that brought the Hungarians into armed conflict with the Soviet Union require a fairly patient unraveling if they are to be understood. Some things can probably never be completely sorted out—the importance of Radio Free Europe in encouraging the Hungarians to take up arms and to believe that the United States would support them, for example; or the involvement of the British government and MI6 in goading the Hungarians to fight in order to tie up the Soviet Union in the streets of Budapest while the United Kingdom, France, and Israel invaded Egypt—but I will do my best to distinguish fantasy from reality.

Countermyths have grown up too, of course, some of which were dreamed up by the KGB at the time of the uprising and have taken root and flourished over the decades—that the Freedom Fighters were right-wing anti-Semites, for instance; or that the entire episode was the work of Western intelligence agencies, a CIA plot from the start.

At the time, it looked on the contrary very much as if the Western powers were trying to calm the situation down and hold the Hungarians back, rather than supply them with weapons or help of any kind, but appearances in such matters can be

deceiving. Certainly, the Hungarians were disappointed not to receive any concrete help from the West—particularly from the United States—and most better-educated Hungarians realized that their revolution was doomed the moment they heard the news of Suez, and were briefly embittered as a result against Great Britain and France; but on the whole, feelings toward the West still remained friendly even among Hungarians who felt they had been betrayed. In any case, as with every revolution, once it began it took on its own logic and moved at its own pace—there was simply no way to stop it or slow it down, even had anybody wanted to. It would end in victory or in defeat, and that was that.

To understand how and why the revolution began, of course, it is necessary to go farther back than 1956, or even 1945, when the Red Army finally took Budapest after a long and bitter siege and drove the German army out. Hungary lies on the border—one might almost say the fault line—between East and West, and always has. Settled by the descendants of Attila's Hun followers (hence "Hungary"), it eventually flourished as a Christian kingdom; was defeated and occupied by the Turks; and was liberated, only to become ruled from Vienna as a reluctant part of the Hapsburg empire.

Given its history and its geography, Hungary always looked toward the West and feared the East.

Hungary was a land of many brave, hopeless battles against overwhelming odds, so it was perhaps not surprising that the Hungarians took up battle against the Soviet Union at the height of the cold war.

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