

# The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 at Sixty Years, Liberal Reform, and the Search for a Useable Past

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## Abstract

The story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution at sixty years remains contested. The current center-right government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at once embraces the Revolution and yet at the same time trumpets the failure of the liberal states of the West. Hungarians are encouraged to view the authoritarian politics of Vladimir Putin as a successful model worthy of emulation. In this light the liberal state envisioned by many of the revolutionaries, let alone the liberal state expected by the European Union stands in contrast with one of the principal tenets of the ruling FIDESz/Christian Democrat (KDNP) coalition. At the same time, the current yearning for an illiberal state accords with a strand of desire more akin to those who supported Cardinal Mindszenty during the Revolution and by extension his sympathy for the authoritarian regime of Miklós Horthy.

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The story of the 1956 Revolution is a complicated one at best. The intense nationalism generated by the event created odd bedfellows whose immediate interest was the expulsion of the Soviet Union from the country. Students demanding liberal reform in the street insisted on the return of former prime minister Imre Nagy, a communist who only gradually joined the Revolution. The multi-party revolutionary state that he helped forge was made up of parties and personages he had helped destroy during the short-lived Republic in 1945-1948. Cardinal Mindszenty and other apologists for the Kingdom of Hungary, which was obliterated in World War II, garnered loyalty among many of the revolutionaries. But the Revolution was brutally crushed and revolutionaries from a wide spectrum of political beliefs, including Imre Nagy, were put to death through a process of juridical murder. Almost immediately a lost-cause narrative was created in the West,

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encapsulated by Time Magazine's 1956 "Man of the Year" depicting a Hungarian freedom fighter standing bravely against unjust Soviet oppression and occupation.<sup>2</sup>

The didactic of the Cold War ensured that the much more complicated story of the politics of the Revolution were subdued. It is no surprise then that the ending of communist rule and the establishment of the Hungarian Republic in 1989 heralded a debate over the Revolution and its relationship to the newly established Republic as political parties utilized selected strands of the story to legitimize their various platforms. The center-left led by the Socialists (MSZP) and the Free Democrats (SzDSz) claimed the legacy of Imre Nagy and forwarded a platform that encouraged European integration. The center-right led first by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and then the Young Democrats (FIDESz) remained wary of the communist legacy and claimed a more nationalist narrative that legitimized Hungary's thousand-year history which included the legacy of the Miklós Horthy regime (1920-1944) that allied Hungary to the Axis. These strands of history utilized by both factions provided plenty of fodder for mud-slinging, which was put on full display during the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution.

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The collapse of communist power in 1989 Hungary was marked by both an unstable economy and an undermining of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party's (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSzMP) legitimacy. This was on full display at the funeral of Imre Nagy on 16 June. The demand for the recovery of his body and the funeral

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<sup>2</sup> The historian David W. Blight explains how the crushing defeat of the Confederacy was transformed into a glorious and heroic event in order to create an atmosphere that could lead to national reunion. These narratives almost always leave out the more complex and painful details of the story and the Lost Cause narrative that stemmed from the American Civil War largely ignored slavery as its source and supported the politics of the Jim Crow south (Blight, 2001). The Hungarian Revolution was transformed from a story of failure to one of heroism and moral victory over the oppression of the Soviet State.

broadened into a re-evaluation of the Revolution. At Nagy's reburial Tibor Méray eulogized, "If you are without guilt then those that sent you to the gallows are murderers. Let their punishment be the contempt of the nation...the nations of the world know that this funeral was not a gift of the regime, but won by the people" (Méray, 1989; Kis, 1995: 45; Benziger, 2008: 26-29). As historians such as András Bozoki and Rudolf L. Tőkés have shown, the negotiations that led to the establishment of the Republic demonstrated the many fractures within the opposition, but it is telling that the Hungarian people rejected MSzMP hegemony overwhelmingly in a referendum that stripped them of their power in November that same year (Tőkés, 1996; Bozoki, 2002). The bitter truth that many Hungarians knew, but could not publically express, now became institutionalized by the First Act of Parliament 1990 which proclaimed that the 1956 Revolution was a War of Independence. What seemed like a triumph, however, almost immediately began to sow the seeds of acrimony. The original draft of the bill had included Nagy's name as the symbolic head of the Revolution. It also named the perpetrators of the terror that followed. In a last-minute maneuver, the names were removed, and hostility and mistrust between the MDF and the center-left deepened. For some, Nagy's communist past was unpalatable, and others worried about linkages with the communist past that might damn their political careers, revealing the uneasiness that many felt regarding the complexity of the politics surrounding the Revolution (Benziger, 2008: 118).

The inability of the MDF to right the economy and the loss of one million jobs lead many Hungarians to yearn for the years under János Kádár and its social security system that had raised many Hungarian's standard of living, albeit in comparison to other countries under Soviet sway. The Socialist Party (MSzP) that had been formed from the MSzMP in the Fall of 1989 now saw its fortunes reversed and came to power in coalition with the SzDSz in 1994 (Szamuely, 1996: 67; Rácz, 2003: 446). The legacy of the Revolution loomed large, and personages at odds with each other in 1956 were now joined in an uncomfortable marriage featuring those whose legacy included a role in the suppression of the Revolution and the consolidation of the People's Republic under Kádár and former revolutionaries. What made this a most bitter pill to swallow was the Socialist Party's bid to co-opt Nagy's legacy through a memorial bill. In this way they would seek to redress the insult perpetrated by the removal of Nagy's name in the First Act of Parliament and further legitimize their political standing through linkage to a revolutionary martyr. The bitter debate that ensued ensured the many factional interpretations of the Revolution and Nagy were enshrined in the minutes of parliament.

The center-right parties asserted that Nagy was a follower of events and therefore should be memorialized in concert along with all of the other revolutionary martyrs. Ottó Sándorffy of the Smallholders Party claimed that Nagy "...knew his communist comrades would never forgive his desire to remain Hungarian...[he] would never have wanted to be separated from his companions who fought by his side." He then proceeded to read the names of those who had been killed during Kádár's reign of terror that followed the Revolution into the minutes of parliament forcing all members to stand out of respect for the dead (Sándorffy, 1997). With the Socialists holding a majority in parliament, the bill officially naming Nagy a *vertanu* (blood witness) passed, but for a brief moment the coalition that had toppled the MSzMP in 1989 was brought together including most of the members of the MSzP coalition partner SzDSz (Benziger, 2008: 119-126).

Interestingly, FIDESz whose leader Viktor Orbán had captured the imagination of many young people with his demand for liberal democracy at the funeral of Nagy, took a sharp turn to the right after the second national election. Unable to gain political traction with the electorate as a center-left party, FIDESz embraced a Christian nationalist narrative and critiqued the Socialist/SzDSz embrace of austerity demanded by the World Bank and the IMF. This appealed to a large section of the polity that had been left out of the transition to capitalism and those who were repelled by the return of former communists through the guise of the Socialist Party. Like the former MDF prime minister József Antall, Orbán embraced Hungary's thousand-year old history that included the interwar regime of Miklós Horthy (1920-1944) who had allied Hungary with the Axis (Lendvai, 2012: 68). The center-left charged the center-right of reworking history in order to legitimize Hungary's interwar regime while avoiding the subject of the country's genocide that claimed the lives of 560,000 Jews and left the country in ruins. While the center-left was accused of promoting the failed agenda of the socialist past, worse yet, it was accused of protecting those who had aided in maintaining the Soviet yoke over Hungary for forty-four years. The bitter politics did little to ameliorate Hungary's economic woes, and FIDESz convinced the polity to give them the reins of power in the next national election in 1998 only to turn them over yet again to the Socialists in 2002. Though critiquing the demands for austerity, FIDESz joined the Socialists in the push for Hungary's entrance into the European Union which Hungary joined in 2004.

On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, the Socialists won an unprecedented second term in power. The election was close, and revelations later that year that the Socialist Party had lied about the state of the economy during the election

campaign created uproar within the center-right opposition parties and led to popular protests across Hungary that culminated in a series of riots during the fiftieth anniversary commemorations. Lines had already been drawn between the Socialist coalition and many of the Revolutionaries who were still living. The pleas made by Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány and President László Sólyom, a former member of the MDF, for a unified celebration went unheeded by many. Former revolutionary and FIDESz MP Mária Wittner claimed that a line of righteousness divided those who had fought for the revolution and those who had suppressed it (Gréczy, 2006: 3). Likewise, noted revolutionary Imre Mécs from SzDSZ and Miklós Vásárhelyi who had been part of Nagy's government asserted that this was impossible (Vásárhelyi, Mécs, 1997). The negotiated regime change of 1989 had assured democracy, but not the promise of justice that was inexorably linked to the 1956 Revolution. This problem is highlighted in the 2010 film *Bűn és Büntetlenség* (Crime and Impunity) centered on Béla Biszku, Interior Minister under János Kádár, who is portrayed living happily in his village convinced that he had served his country through his role in the terror (Novák, 2010). In the absence of substantive legal proceedings against those responsible for the many crimes committed during the demobilization of the revolution, there was no mechanism to re-examine grievances in a way that permitted some kind of national atonement and forgiveness (Benziger, 2008:158). In this frenzied atmosphere, FIDESz held a counter-commemoration on 23 October, the day the Revolution began in 1956, which dwarfed the official commemorations. Viktor Orbán ripped into the Socialists "...they [the Socialists] took away the right of free elections...it happened in a country twice tormented by the greatest lie of the twentieth century, Socialism!" (quoted in Benziger, 2008: 159-162). Orbán's call for a second revolution resonated with the polity, and the government's calls for austerity played into his hands. As Paul Lendvai asserts, government plans for the reform of health care and higher education that included higher fees were rejected in a 2008 referendum by 82% of those voting (Lendvai, 2012: 198). In 2010, the Hungarian people delivered a resounding victory to the FIDESz/Christian Democrat coalition providing them with a super-majority in parliament. The SzDSz ceased to exist, and the Socialist Party was shattered. Center-left political parties have been unable to gain their footing to this date.

Orbán's promise of a new constitution legitimized the Christian national politics of the interwar years. The National Avowal states, "...Saint Stephen...made our country part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago...We date the restoration of our country's

self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected body of popular representatives was formed (Magyarország Alaptörvéne, 2011: 10656).” In a single stroke the constitution legislated history by separating the Horthy regime from its collaboration with the German occupation and the Hungarian Republic from its two communist regimes. The constitution also seems to remedy the lack of justice in relationship to these time periods by stating: “We deny any statute of limitations for the inhuman crimes committed against the Hungarian nation and its citizens under the national socialist and communist dictatorships (Magyarország Alaptörvénye, 2011: 6).” Béla Biszku was tried and convicted under this law for his role in a massacre of workers in Salgótarján in November 1956 (New York Times, 2016).<sup>3</sup> But the hopefulness for justice was undermined by the forced early retirement of judges, and majority coalition appointments seemed to indicate the breakdown of the separation of powers through the creation of a majoritarian judiciary. Most recently, critique of the EU and calls for the creation of an illiberal state have become increasingly shrill. In a 2014 speech in Romania, Orbán rejected liberal values as being corrupt and claimed that Hungary was now building a state whose “character...is not liberal (Orbán, 2014).” More recently on the anniversary of the 1848 Revolution, Orbán blamed the EU for “mass migration,” a reference to the current refugee crisis, claiming that it would undermine Christianity and the nation states of Europe through a blending of populations and cultures (Orbán, 2016). Hungary’s rhetoric and actions sets it in stark contrast to the EU’s promotion of democracy and the development of civil society, and Orbán’s idealization of the authoritarian politics of Russia’s Vladimir Putin only heightens this concern (Dercsényi, 2015). The tilt towards the right and the inability of the center-left to create a viable opposition has served to strengthen the right wing, most notably Jobbik (the party whose name means literally „the better one”). They admire the fascist politics of Ferenc Szálasi, who at the end of World War II succeeded Horthy in a German-backed coup d’etat on 15 October 1944, after Horthy attempted to withdraw Hungary from the war. Like their fascist predecessors, Jews and Gypsies are unwelcome outsiders for them, and reunion with Hungarians living outside the borders of the state is central to their ideology. They now constitute Hungary’s second largest party and openly compete with FIDESz, moving Hungary further rightward (Kirchick, 2012; Vági, Csósz, Kádár, 2013: 361-363; Népszabadság, 2014: 1; Miklós, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Biszku’s original conviction was overturned, but he was tried again and convicted on lesser crimes and died while his case was on appeal.

The nativist sentiment intimately intertwined with the intense nationalism evoked by Orbán and Jobbik was fortified by the passage of close to 400,000 mostly Muslim refugees through Hungary during the summer of 2015. The event provided both parties with images that seemed to confirm that the enemy was at the door. A fence has been erected to staunch the human flow and Orbán has called for work camps for illegal refugees (Traynor, 2015; Sarnyai, 2015). And yet, Hungary needs the EU for badly needed infrastructure projects. For example, between 2007-2013 the EU contributed 720 million Euros for the new number four metro in Budapest and will spend another 344 billion Euros on infrastructure projects through 2016. In spite of its intense critique of the EU, FIDESz has to play within the rules of the institution or risk substantial financial downturn (Ambrus and Hargitai, 2016: 1, 6). In the absence of a coherent center-left challenge, Jobbik claims to be the party most ready to take on the EU and the threat posed by outsiders because they do not have to make compromises with the liberal institutions they excoriate.

Would Hungary actually leave the EU? On the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the Revolution Hungarians went to the polls to vote on a referendum that asked them if they wanted the EU to set the number of refugees that can settle in Hungary without the permission of parliament (Lencsés, 2016: 3). The referendum formally failed, because only 43% of the electorate voted, with participation thus falling below the 50-percent validity threshold. Orbán posed this vote as a test of national sovereignty (Kingsley, 2016), however, and hails the results as a confirmation thereof, given that over 98% of those who participated in the referendum voted against co-operating with the EU's resettlement plans.

Up to this point the FIDESz/KDNP coalition has been successful in part by scapegoating the EU and playing into a deep-set national pride that is intimately connected to its more than thousand-year-old history on the European continent. Highlighting its connection to the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, and the interwar regime of Miklós Horthy that had restored Hungary as a Kingdom after World War I, underscores the importance of sovereignty in contrast to German and then Soviet occupation. Orbán's ability to convince the polity to maintain majoritarian rule through two national elections has swung the country to the right and enabled the regime to seriously threaten the rule of law and openly challenge the rational legal principles on which the EU was founded. Hungary is not alone in this project, but on the sixtieth anniversary of the Revolution it seems strange that – while studies of the Cold War highlight this event as one of the great

challenges to Soviet hegemony – the country seems ready to reject the values embraced by that Revolution. Liberal values were ready-made not only by the contest of the Cold War, but by earlier attempts to create a liberal state as exemplified by the 1848 Hungarian Revolution.

Perhaps this sentiment is overblown, as the Revolution never had time to mature and we will never know how long Hungarians might have accepted a national communist like Imre Nagy as leader of a multi-party state. Indeed, we cannot know whether Hungary would have continued in the direction of a liberal state. We are left instead with the idealism of the “Sixteen Points” that animated thousands of university students and helped stimulate a mass mobilization that humiliated the Soviet Union sixty years ago.

In this light, we do understand the linkage between 1989 and the short-lived Revolution of 1956, when Imre Mécs asked Hungarians at the funeral of Imre Nagy, “How could [we, Hungarians] live for 33 years without freedom?” (Mécs, 1989).

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