

The Tragedy of Prime Minister Imre Nagy and the Radio Free Europe – 1956–1958¹

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Imre Mikes,² a journalist at Radio Free Europe followed Imre Nagy and his colleagues' lives even after 1956. His commentaries concerning their case were important because of the fact – among others – that the Hungarian audience could gain information about the fate of the actors in the drama of the 1956 Revolution almost solely from the reports and commentaries on Radio Free Europe between 1957 and 1958.

Following the military intervention of the Soviet Troops which started on 4th November the so-called Imre Nagy group was given the possibility of asylum at the Yugoslavian Embassy. Tito suggested to Khrushchev that the Nagy Imre group should be allowed to go to Yugoslavia. On November 8, János Kádár made the granting of permission for them to leave Hungary in the case of Imre Nagy and his cabinet will be resigned.

In a letter to Ranković, the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, Imre Nagy wrote that he had not been informed about the fact that hi and his cabinet was acquitted by the Presidential Council of their duties; on the other hand, if the Kádár cabinet already had taken its oath he sees no reason to resigning, and he would not make any statement regarding the issue.

¹ The study is an edited version of a chapter of the book by Irén SIMÁNDI, *Hungary on the Wave of Radio Free Europe 1951–1956*, Budapest 2005.

² Imre (Mikes) Győri (1900–1990) journalist, worked at Free Europe Radio in Munich between August 1951 and August 1976. He edited *Reflektor*, one of RFE's most popular programmes.

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János Kádár urgently wanted to put an end to the situation whereby there were two governments. He made an agreement in principle with Dalibor Soldatić, Ambassador of Yugoslavia to Hungary, according to which if Imre Nagy and his colleagues distanced themselves from the “Counter-Revolution” they would be allowed to leave the Embassy on the 17th and Kádár would guarantee the safety of the group. Imre Nagy did not resign as Prime Minister and did not change his former standpoint.³ Almost at the same time as the above-mentioned agreement another one was made between the Soviet leaders (Malenkov, Suslov, Serov) and Kádár concerning the transportation of the Imre Nagy group to Romania.

In accordance with the latter agreement Kádár annulled the agreement with the Yugoslavians, and demanded that Imre Nagy and his group to be turned over to the Hungarian Government by the Embassy.

Dobrivoje Vidić, Yugoslavian Deputy Foreign Minister presented a memorandum to the Hungarian Government on November 19, in which he requested that the Imre Nagy case be resolved. The Kádár government issued an official statement on November 21, in which it promised that Imre Nagy and his colleagues would be freely allowed to go home and they would not be called to account. Trusting in this promise, Imre Nagy and his colleagues left the Yugoslavian Embassy. On the morning of the same day, November 21, Gheorghiu-Dej, First Secretary of the Romanian Worker’s Party arrived to Budapest, and as a result of the negotiations conducted with him a new agreement was made regarding the transportation of Imre Nagy and his colleagues to Romania. In the evening of that day they were taken to Mátyásföld. Tibor Méray reported on this event as follows: “*Ferenc Münnich, Interior Minister sent a bus for them: it would return them home; first Haraszti and his family would have been taken home to their flat; they lived nearby, in Damjanich Street. Near the Soviet Embassy military vehicles were waiting. This was not really conspicuous, as the Embassy had been under permanent observation since November 4. Nevertheless it came as a surprise when KGB officers got on the bus. When Imre Nagy stepped onto the bus somebody –allegedly the driver – leant over and whispered in Imre Nagy’s ear: ‘Be careful, Comrade Nagy, they will not take you*

³ See J. M. RAINER, *Nagy Imre 1953–1958. Politikai életrajz*, Budapest 1999, pp. 343–348.

to the place they told you'. Imre Nagy turned and immediately got off the bus, and those who were already on the bus followed him. Standing in the street he declared: he was not willing to leave until the Soviet officers had left the bus. The Soviet state security officers got off the bus. The Yugoslavian Ambassador, who had accompanied Nagy and his colleagues to the bus, protested vehemently against the presence of the Soviet military officers and sent Milan Georgijevic, diplomat and Milan Drobac, military attaché to the bus so that somebody would be present while Imre Nagy and his colleagues were taken home. Imre Nagy got on the bus again. The others followed him. The bus left. At that moment one of the KGB officers jumped up to the already moving bus, which was heading towards Gorkij Avenue. Up to that moment there had not been any problem: Sándor Haraszti and his family lived there. But the bus stopped not in front of their house, but at the Soviet Headquarters of Budapest. A Soviet lieutenant-colonel turned up and called upon the passengers on the bus to get off and go into the building. The two Yugoslavian diplomats protested. They were dragged from the bus. One of them declared the procedure to be in contravention of the agreement signed by the governments of Hungary and Yugoslavia. The Soviet lieutenant-colonel answered him that the agreement had nothing to do with him and that he was following the command of his superiors. Imre Nagy and the others in the group did not want to get off. They were forced to leave the bus. The women and the children were crying and wailing loudly. Then the small group disappeared into the building of the Soviet Headquarters.”⁴

The Kádár government’s spokesman informed the public on November 23 that Imre Nagy and his colleagues had gone to Romania. János Kádár expressed his opinion regarding the case in a speech of his published on November 27 as follows: “*In my opinion these events are already passing into history, and our people will forget about them and return to the tasks of the day soon [...]. The Imre Nagy government and Imre Nagy himself committed an unforgivable crime against the Hungarian people.*”⁵ Considering the forcible removal of Imre Nagy and his colleagues to Romania and their immunity he said that “*taking into account the original wish of Imre Nagy*

⁴ T. MÉRAY, *Nagy Imre élete és halála*, Munich 1978, pp. 343–344.

⁵ *Népszabadság*, November 27, 1956, p. 2.

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*and his colleagues, we made it possible for them to leave the Hungarian People's Republic. Since the government of the Romanian People's Republic was ready to offer them sanctuary, they went to Romania on November 23. We made a promise that we will not take legal action against them for their serious past acts (subsequently admitted by themselves as well). We will act in accordance with this promise".*⁶ Gyula Kállai travelled to Bucharest on January 25, 1957 on the authority of the Executive Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) to meet and negotiate with Imre Nagy. Kállai wanted to convince Nagy to make a self-criticism in which he would withdraw his decisions from October and November. Imre Nagy refused to do so. Gyula Kállai reported on the unsuccessful meeting on January 29 at a session of the Executive Committee of MSZMP after he arrived back to Budapest. In addition he proposed calling Imre Nagy and his colleagues to account before a court of law. As a consequence of this the collection of the documents regarding the activity of the Imre Nagy government from the October and November of 1956 was begun. The impeachment of Imre Nagy and his colleagues had to be agreed by Moscow, and in order to obtain this, János Kádár carried on negotiations between 21st and 28th March with the Soviet leaders of the time who agreed with the strict treatment.

Colonel Sándor Rajnai arrested the members of the Imre Nagy-group on various dates starting on March 27 in Snagov. Imre Nagy himself was arrested on March 14. János Kádár asked Stoica, Prime Minister of the Romanian People's Republic in a letter to revoke Imre Nagy and his colleagues' "right of asylum" on April 5. The consentient letter arrived to Budapest on April 10. A People's Tribunal of the Supreme Court was set up by statute on April 6 and the main area of competence of the new institution was to hear significant political crimes.

Imre Nagy and his colleagues were taken under the cover of total secrecy first to Tököl from Bukarest on April 14 and then to the Gyorskocsi Street building of the Examining Board of the Political Department of the National Police. There they were kept in custody apart from each other. The interrogation of Imre Nagy started on April 15. The indictment necessary for the trial was made by the Department of Political Investigation of National Police Headquarters by August 10.

⁶ Ibidem.

The interrogations were not covered at all in the Hungarian press of the time. However, a lot of articles were published which aimed to discredit Imre Nagy. One of these by József Révész published in *Népszabadság* analysed Imre Nagy's activity between 1930 and 1955 by quoting those parts of Imre Nagy's speeches – omitting the original context – in which Imre Nagy so to speak “criticized himself”. He tried to pretend in this way that he himself had admitted his own “mistakes” – including for instance petty-bourgeois behaviour, right-wing opportunism and plans concerning the transformation and change socialist agriculture.⁷ In another article József Révész outlined for his readers the role played by Imre Nagy in the period between 1953 and 1956, and he emphasized Imre Nagy's „*opportunism, nationalism, anti-Marxism, and his readiness to betray the Party and socialism itself*”.⁸ He tried to make people believe that the role which Imre Nagy had played during the Revolution was different to the opinion held by the man in the street, because actually he had turned against the Party and the people. In conclusion, he wrote as a fact that “...*Imre Nagy was not a leaf swept up by the storm in the ‘Counter-Revolution’ but the shameful and treacherous standard bearer of the Counter-Revolution against the people’s power*”.⁹ János Kádár and Béla Biszku travelled to Moscow on 20th–21st June, where they conducted negotiations with the Soviet government about – among other things – Imre Nagy's case. Imre Mikes, in a passionate gloss he wrote just on June 21, the day of the above-mentioned visit, provided his listeners with an analysis of János Kádár's character for which he used the documentation regarding the Hungarian October compiled by the UN's Special Committee on the Problem of. He chose the characteristic figure of the French Revolution, Robespierre to characterize János Kádár: “...*let's start with this: we do not want to, and even if we wanted to, we would not be able to draw a comparison between Robespierre and Kádár. On one hand, because one of them, in spite of his terrible iniquities, was great as a Man, as a Frenchman, and as a Spirit. While the other person is so insignificant as a Man, as a Hungarian, and a Spirit alike that even the most terrible crimes cannot make him great. But the comparison*

⁷ Ibidem. May 9, 1957, p. 4.

⁸ Ibidem. May 17, pp. 4–5.

⁹ Ibidem.

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is even more impossible because Robespierre believed fanatically in everything he said and did, whilst Kádár does not believe in anything he says or does. The former was ready to do everything to win liberty for France and the French people; the latter is ready to do anything to prevent Hungary and the Hungarian people from being free. If we measure the two men in terms of the means at their disposal, that is chains and executioners, then their similarity would be deceptive. But they are incomparable in virtue of Spirit and Idea."¹⁰ Mikes queried the reliability of János Kádár, citing his speech of November 1, 1956: "...this Revolution was prepared, led and its victory assisted mainly by them, the most honourable members of the Party. Since they prepared it and helped it to win through immense blood sacrifice, the struggle did not go the wrong way and made Hungary a country of Independence and Liberty instead of Oppression and Liberty."¹¹ He wrote about the suppression of the Revolution, the request for Soviet military aid, and Kádár's role in these actions: "Our barely flowering and still ecstatic liberty, of course, was nipped in the bud by the colonialists of Moscow again. But the noose was offered with servile enthusiasm, by Kádár and others of the same stripe."¹² Commemorating the forthcoming anniversary of the Revolution leaflets and graffiti appeared all over the country from October 10, 1957. *Népszabadság* "commemorated" the upcoming celebration by publishing an article by János Kádár entitled "Workers' Internationalism and the Soviet Union", in which regarding October 1956 he highlighted the importance of collaboration had made with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. This collaboration – as he stated – defended the power of workers and gave a lesson of proletarian internationalism and its invincible power to all the sceptics. He declared as a fact that the imperialists were defeated by arms in October 1956. The counter-revolutionary attempt exposed – according to Kádár's opinion – the threatening bourgeois nationalism and the revisionism, and it mobilized a fight against them.¹³

¹⁰ Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Manuscript Collection (hereinafter OSZ Kt), 451/1168 fond, p. 2.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹² Ibidem, p. 4.

¹³ *Népszabadság*, October 10, 1957, p. 3.

Imre Mikes in his commentary indignantly refused Kádár's "festive manifestation". He confuted Kádár's statements one after the other, first of all the one according to which the Revolution (officially called 'Counter-Revolution') was infiltrated by the spirit of nationalism. "*Over-patriotic prejudice derives from our national history*" – emphasized Mikes and he continued as follows: "the autotelic prejudice may have its origin in our history." In compliance with it, he specified those nations against which Hungary once had to fight for its freedom. He called Kádár's attention to the fact that – besides the Germans and Turks – now and then the Russians had intervened in Hungary's struggle for freedom, and not on behalf of our country. He mentioned 1849 as an example: "*...when General Paskievich let his emperor know that Hungary was lying at the feet of His Majesty, he was wrong because we do not lie at the feet of any tyrant, at most under their feet. As we did not lie to the tyrant's feet in November, although we were there – under his feet. But whether at or under his feet, Kádár is not willing to even mention the owner of these feet in connection with our historic adversity, and this clearly shows how independent the system we live in is and how independent the Prime Minister of this system is.*"¹⁴ But the Revolution in October was not even blemished by the shadow of bourgeois nationalism. Mikes quoted a definition of bourgeois nationalism by Pyotr Yudin, Soviet philosopher: "*...the bigoted domination of the national idea in the life of the state and the society stirs up hostility against other nations and tries to conceal the ambitions for Power of a class or group by this hostility.*"¹⁵ However, the Hungarian October – as Mikes went on – did not hate any of the nations. In the course of Hungarian history the Hungarian people happened to have sympathized with the people of Russia but never asked for the "*reign of Soviet tanks and the exploitation of Soviet defterdars*".¹⁶ Furthermore, no class or group made any effort to gain an exclusive power during the Hungarian October – they rather aimed to gain universal human rights. Mikes reminded the radio proclamation of János Kádár broadcasted on November 1, when he "*talked not about bourgeois nationalism but national struggle for independence*".¹⁷

¹⁴ OSZK Kt, 451/1190 fond, pp. 2–3.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Tax collectors of the Ottoman Empire were called "defterdar" in the 16–17th centuries in the Hungarian region of the Empire.

¹⁷ OSZK Kt, 451/1190 fond, p. 4.

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Regarding the assistance provided by the Soviet Union, he quoted another, previous speech of János Kádár given on November 1, 1956: “*There is a serious and alarming chance that a foreign intervention can condemn our country to the tragic fate of Korea. With its blood, our nation has given testimony of its steady support of the government’s demand for the withdrawal of Soviet forces. We do not want dependence anymore! We do not want our country to become a battlefield!*”¹⁸ Mikes interpreted as the reason of this turnaround the weakness of János Kádár’s character.

Some journalists visited Hungary on 16–17th January, 1958. At a press conference organized for them Ferenc Münnich declared that Imre Nagy and Pál Maléter would be impeached for “the acts they committed against the Hungarian People’s Republic”. On the next day Géza Szénási, chief prosecutor brought a charge against Imre Nagy and his colleagues.¹⁹ The trial was started by the Special Committee of the People’s Court of Supreme Court on February 5 in Fő Street, and this was not covered at all in the Hungarian Press of the time.

After the execution of the former Prime Minister, a report was published by the Hungarian News Agency (MTI) in *Népszabadság* on June 17, 1958. A notice on the prosecution conducted against Imre Nagy and his colleagues was released by the Ministry of Justice in this report. The notice included the bill of indictment by the chief prosecutor, the names of the accused, and the number of witnesses who were heard. The main statements of the impeachment against Imre Nagy and his colleagues were as follows: participation in an anti-state organization in 1955, the preparation and unleashing the 1956 Revolution, an attempted *coup d’etat* against the Hungarian People’s Republic with the aim of overthrowing it.

The prosecutor analysed Imre Nagy’s articles as proof, finding in them – such as in the one entitled *Morality and Ethics* – evidence of the author urging on the overthrow of the people’s democratic state. The prosecutor pointed out the objective of forming an alliance with the hostile forces of the opponents of people’s democracy in another essay of Imre Nagy entitled “Some current questions”, and he tried to prove Imre Nagy’s attempt to annul the defensive alliance(s) of the country on the

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Handbook of 1956. Chronology*, Budapest 1996, p. 305.

basis of his work entitled “The five main principles of international relations”. The notice listed in detail the names and acts of those who were responsible for the events which took place between October 23 and November 4, and their relations with foreign people and organizations, such as Radio Free Europe. Regarding the function of the latter, in the article it was stated as follows: “*he propagated the counter-revolutionary revolt by the well known balloon action,²⁰ in broadcasts on Hungarian Radio, and after the Revolution broke out he assisted and directed it with military commands.²¹ The conspirators followed these commands*”. In the course of the legal proceedings – according to the notice – it was proved that Imre Nagy and his colleagues conspired with the imperialist forces of the bourgeoisie on the basis of their revisionist, bourgeois nationalist ideas to overthrow people’s democracy. At the end of the notice a comment by the Special Committee of the People’s Court of Supreme Court was quoted: “*...the Committee found the accused guilty and sentenced Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter, dr József Szilágyi, and Miklós Gimes to death, Ferenc Donáth to 12 years, Zoltán Tildy to 6 years, Ferenc Jánosi to 3 years, Miklós Vásárhelyi to 5 years imprisonment, and Sándor Kopácsi to life imprisonment. The judgement is definitive. The death sentences have been carried out.*”²²

Imre Mikes took derisive notice of the events in a commentary on June 20. He pointed to the fact that the announcement by Antal Apró concerning the executions was accepted with general enthusiasm by parliament. Then he quoted one of János

²⁰ The so called balloon action was organized by Radio Free Europe for those who had no convenient radiosets behind the Iron Curtain at that time. The Free Europe Committee organized the balloon action with the assistance of the employees of Radio Free Europe in the direction of the air space of Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The leaflets were written by the members of the “National Resistance Movement”, a fictive group formed by the American leaders of Radio Free Europe and its employees in Munich. The first balloon action took place against Czechoslovakia between 13–17th July in 1953 – its cover-name was “Operation Prospero”. In the course of this action 12 million leaflets were sent to Czechoslovakia using 6519 balloons. The second balloon action called “Operation Veto” started in April of 1954 and it was repeated in July and August when 2,5 million leaflets were sent to call people’s attention to the political, economic and social absurdities of the communist system and to propagate the political system of the western part of the world. SIMÁNDI, *Hungary on the Wave*, pp. 42–50. See I. SIMÁNDI, *Léggömbakció*, in: Valóság, 2006, No. 10, pp. 33–42.

²¹ *Népszabadság*, June 17, 1958, p. 3.

²² *Ibidem*.

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Kádár's statements that he had repeated several times in the past: "...he was not willing to bring any action against Imre Nagy and his group because of their past activity."²³ Mikes described the "servile" parliament as follows: "*When the deputies, gluttons the Hungarian guillotine performing their servile dancing around the bodies of the latest victims of October, they brand themselves as snipers by their ghoulish applause. Snipers, who are hunting for quarry under the cover of international law and universal morals.*"²⁴

Following the announcement by the Ministry of Justice a series of demonstrations started in western countries at the Hungarian and Soviet Embassies upon hearing the news of the executions. *Népszabadság* provided answers to the questions of the journalists from international news agencies (AFP, French; Reuters, British; AP, American) in an announcement by a government spokesman. The spokesman declared the events to be the internal affair of the Hungarian People's Democracy in connection with which the government and the people of the country would not tolerate any intervention. "*The most convenient answer to the questions would be the following: it is no affair of theirs and they should mind their own business.*" The spokesman declared the issue to be closed and then he set forth that the Hungarian and "*international communist press and the progressive part of public opinion*" accepted with approval the consequences of the events, the sentences and the fact that the criminals paid the penalty for their acts. "*In spite of this the reactionary capitalist press, radio and other means of propaganda*" utilized the government's announcement to provoke a smear campaign against the Hungarian People's Republic – as the notice by the spokesman stated.²⁵

Imre Mikes expounded the "internal affair or not" problem in a 4th July broadcast of the programme called *Reflector*. He analysed the question of whether the protest against the executions may be considered as an intervention to internal affairs rather than the repression of the Revolution, since "...if somebody had intervened in the internal affairs of Hungary it was nobody else but Mr Gromyko by declaring

²³ OSZK Kt, 451/1260 fond, p. 2.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ *Népszabadság*, June 28, 1958, p. 3.

the death of Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter, and their martyred colleagues as the fulfilment of eternal justice". Because these are decisive questions: *"Is the issue of Imre Nagy a strictly internal issue of Budapest indeed? Some defamatory statements from the other side of the ocean against our sovereignty is an outrage, but our thousand year-old country under the caterpillar tracks of thousands of foreign tanks is not an outrage?"*²⁶

Imre Mikes again commemorated to the events of 1956 October in October 1958, and besides recalling the events in details he named those politicians and former members of the 1956 Imre Nagy government (for instance Gyula Kállai, Ferenc Münnich etc.) who were in important positions at various levels of the political administration then, in 1958.

He expressed his consternation at the fact that these "comrades", such as Ferenc Münnich, Interior Minister of the Imre Nagy government, designated Imre Nagy as "a totally vile traitor". These politicians participated in the "formation of democracy" too. Nothing else testified better to the workings of "democracy" than *"...the crackling orator above the grave and the people in silence next to the grave"* – wrote Imre Mikes.²⁷

Imre Mikes commemorated Imre Nagy and the October of 1956 every year. He considered keeping the martyred Prime Minister's true memory alive to be his own duty, maybe (among others) because his political view of Imre Nagy during the Revolution had been negative. He tried to keep alive the spirit of 1956 through his commentaries for those generations who heard about the "old events of the past" only from rumours, sentences left half-finished, and secrecy.

²⁶ OSZK Kt, 451/1263, fond, p. 3.

²⁷ Ibidem. 451/1283 fond, p. 3.

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Abstract

The military intervention of the Soviet Troops which started on 4th November the so-called Imre Nagy group was given the possibility of asylum at the Yugoslavian Embassy. Janos Kádár annulled the agreement with the Yugoslavians, and demanded that Imre Nagy and his group to be turned over to the Hungarian Government by the Embassy. The Kádár government's spokesman informed the public on November 23 that Imre Nagy and his colleagues had gone to Romania. The Imre Nagy government and Imre Nagy himself committed an unforgivable crime against the Hungarian people.

The Radio Free Europe, Imre Mikes reported: at the end of the notice a comment by the Special Committee of the People's Court of Supreme Court was quoted: "... the Committee found the accused guilty and sentenced Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter, dr József Szilágyi, and Miklós Gimes to death, Ferenc Donáth to 12 years, Zoltán Tildy to 6 years, Ferenc Jánosi to 3 years, Miklós Vásárhelyi to 5 years imprisonment, and Sándor Kopácsi to life imprisonment". The judgement is definitive. The death sentences have been carried out.

Keywords

Imre Nagy; Prime Minister of Revolution; Radio Free Europe; Hungarian Revolution 1956; Hungary; 20th Century