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New Insights on the 1956 Crisis

Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956, edited by Jeno Gyorkei of the Military History Institute in Budapest and Miklos Horvath of the Hungarian Army's Political College, is a worthy addition to a series of books by Columbia University Press (Atlantic Studies on Society in Change) surveying many aspects of East Central European society.[1] Originally published in Hungarian in 1996, this book consists of three essays, each about one hundred pages, by Gyorkei and Horvath, Alexander Kirov, and Yevgeny Malashenko, respectively.[2] All three selections primarily focus on Soviet and Hungarian military actions in the 1956 crisis, rather than the Soviet decision making process or the influence of other Warsaw Pact countries.

In the book's preface, Bela Kiraly, the chief editor of the series and a key participant in the 1956 events, poses – and then answers – four questions about the Hungarian crisis that have preoccupied scholars from former communist countries. First, was the 1956 uprising a revolution or counter-revolution? If it was a revolution, did it succeed or fail? Kiraly contends: "Without 1956 the radical changes of the 'lawful revolution' that commenced in 1989 and is still in progress would not have happened, or if it had, it would not have been what it is today."(p. xiv)[3] Second, was the introduction of Soviet troops an aggressive act, or did it constitute military aid to a beleaguered socialist state that had requested it? Kiraly confirms that the Soviet actions did amount to war by pointing out the size of the Soviet military force used in Hungary in the November 4 intervention (17 divisional units), the number of Soviet casualties (722 men killed, 1,251 wounded), and the number of medals awarded to Soviet soldiers (26 "Hero of the Soviet Union" medals, 10,000 combat medals). Kiraly argues that if the USSR had to exert such a great effort, this could not have constituted mere "aid" to Hungary. Third, was there indeed armed conflict between "socialist" states? Kiraly asserts that Hungary had no intention in 1956 of completely abandoning socialism, and therefore the Soviet Union did attack another socialist state.

Finally, was the declaration of neutrality on November 1 the cause, or the effect, of Soviet aggression? Kiraly states that Nagy's declaration was merely the effect; by November 1 Khrushchev and his colleagues were already informing other Warsaw Pact leaders in Bucharest, and on the island of Brioni the following day, of impending action.[4] Soviet tanks were already crossing the border into Hungary. We know from the "Malin notes" that the Soviet leaders reached the decision to invade on October 30-31, well before Nagy's declaration.[5] One should point out, however, that other Hungarian leaders and students had been calling for their country's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact much earlier, and this may indeed have influenced Soviet decision making. Certainly by October 27 and 28, the insurgents included neutrality in their demands, along with a coalition government and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary.

The book contains a wealth of new archival evidence. However, the only essay in it that cites archival documents exclusively is the one written by Alexander Kirov, a Russian military historian (born in 1956); Gyorkei's essay draws primarily on Hungarian documents published in document collections, while Malashenko's section draws on his own memory.[6] In addition to data on divisions and casualties, Kirov provides three maps and two detailed tables. One table accounts for each division active in the October 24 operation and November 4, giving the permanent base, time of combat readiness, and time of border crossing.[7] The second table provides the number of deaths, wounded persons, disappearances, and non-combat-related deaths in each division.

In his introduction, Kirov provides information about his professional background. A lieutenant colonel in the Russian Federation Armed Forces' paratroop formations, he gained access to the exclusive Armed Forces Headquarters Central Archive, which is still closed to most re-

searchers. His experience will inspire Ph.D. candidates around the world. After his defense in 1994, his dissertation and notes were confiscated and he was discharged from the army! Amazingly, these circumstances did not deter him from writing this study. One wonders how he was able to provide exact fond, opis', and delo numbers, except by sheer memory.

The essay by Gyorkei and Horvath, both Hungarian military historians, provides some interesting information. This section, like the other two, contains very little analysis of the events, however, so the reader must draw his own conclusions from the data provided. One gains insight into the plight of the Hungarian political and military leaders themselves. Original Soviet documents and other accounts tend to portray them as vacillating and totally dependent on the Kremlin to make their decisions for them. Gyorkei's essay, on the other hand, contains actual quotes from individual Hungarian leaders, for example from a Hungarian Central Committee meeting on October 26. One clearly grasps their predicament. They could not simply instruct the military to shoot the insurgents, because they would lose the support of the population, and the military might not obey orders anyway. As in the coup of 1991 in the Soviet Union, most Hungarian soldiers did indeed refuse to shoot their fellow countrymen. The Hungarian Politburo members had seen how the first use of force (by the Soviet Union) on October 24 merely exacerbated tensions. On the other hand, if the Hungarian leaders did not take action swiftly by themselves, they risked a second Soviet invasion. Moreover, many Hungarians lost their lives in the post-World War Two "liberation" of Hungary from the Nazis; a failure to "restore order" now would imply that these men had died in vain. They elected Nagy as Prime Minister as the middle course, despite the disapproval of Molotov and other Soviet hardliners.

The Gyorkei essay encourages a more complex view of the Hungarian military. In many cases, members of the armed forces sympathized with the "freedom fighters." Students from top military institutions such as the Zrinyi Miklos Military Academy and the Petofi Academy actually attended the student meetings and approved the 16 demands of the students. Several formations in cities like Szekesfehervar and Gyor "agreed with the legitimate demands of the workers." (p.43) In other cases, the Hungarian military was given conflicting commands which demoralized them and reduced their effectiveness. Military patrols would arrest armed civilians and then be ordered to release them, whereupon these same civilians would again shoot at them. The Hungarian government initially imposed a curfew and banned demonstrations and then rescinded these orders, partly because Nagy argued that people needed to buy bare essentials. This complicated the military's task of identifying and disarming the civilian "rebels."

At still other times, the Hungarian military – particularly the National Guard formed by Imre Nagy and headed by Bela Kiraly – strikes one as harsh and unyielding. According to Kiraly's Defense Plan, "any armed individuals who are not part of the National Guard should be arrested."(p. 94) Hungarian officials who formed the National Guard (which was controlled by the Revolutionary Council for Public Safety) worried about "restoration" and "reactionary attempts" perhaps as much as Moscow did. Apparently the leaders in the National Guard were not always united either. If General Yevgeny Malashenko's interview with Pal Maleter can be believed, the latter claimed that Bela Kiraly was planning to "start a counterrevolutionary regime." (pp. 253-4).

In their essay, Gyorkei and Horvath draw heavily on Bela Kiraly's memoir, which prompts the curious reader to question aspects of Imre Nagy's actions.. Kiraly, commander-in-chief of the National Guard, spoke to Nagy several times by phone the night before the November 4 attack. As is well-known, Nagy refused to give orders to the Hungarian troops to shoot, a decision which stemmed from the humanitarian desire to avoid an all-out war which Hungary could not win. However, he did not tell Kiraly that he planned to seek refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy shortly after his 5:20 a.m. radio broadcast on November 4, essentially abandoning his governmental post. Kiraly had thought that as long as the Nagy government existed, it was his duty to provide some kind of military organization to support it. As Kiraly writes, "If I had known that the Nagy government did not exist, then I would have advised the freedom fighters to cease the hopeless fight and save what lives and public property we could." (p. 108). Why did Nagy not tell Kiraly? Many lives might have been saved. Nagy's radio broadcast further misled Kiraly; Nagy stated "our troops are fighting…the government is at its post."

All three essays provide background information, at times overlapping, on the origins, personnel, and positioning of the Soviet "Osobyi Korpus" (Special Corps) in Hungary. This small command center in Hungary was named at Marshal Zhukov's suggestion, in analogy to the Special Corps of Soviet troops in Mongolia he had commanded in 1939. An agreement of the Allied Powers, and later the Paris Peace Treaty legitimated the stationing of the Special Corps in Hungary after 1945. The Soviet Union used the Special Corps to back up Soviet

troops stationed in Austria, but after the Austrian State Treaty was signed in 1955 it was supposed to withdraw. To create an international legal basis for Soviet troops to remain in Hungary, the Soviet Union signed a new treaty, establishing the Warsaw Pact in 1955. The Special Corps Command was staffed by officers and servicemen who had belonged to the Central Army Group in Austria. The head of the Corps was Lieutenant General Pyotr Nikolayevich Lashchenko and the chief of staff was Brigadier General G.A. Shchelbanyin. The Hungarian units were stationed in Gyor, Kormend, Szombathely, Papa, Szekesfehervar, Kecskemet, Szolnok, Cegled, Debrecen, and other towns. No Soviet troops were stationed right in Budapest, but the military command, political section of the special units, commercial leadership, and hospital built their headquarters in the capital.

Although ordered to draw up a plan for the "Restoration of Order," as early as July 1956, the Special Corps did not seriously expect violence in the country. General Malashenko, a colonel and acting chief of staff of the Special Corps at the time, contends that relations were peaceful between the Corps members and the local Hungarian population. My own research in the Russian Archive of Foreign Policy reveals, however, that a few minor episodes of violence occurred.[8]

Given his key role, Malashenko's memoirs are valuable. Some of his recollections have already been published in the Russian journal *Voenno-istoricheskii Zhurnal*, but other material, such as the interviews with Hungarian military leaders Maleter, Szucs, and Kovacs after they were kidnapped, is new.[8] The Special Corps was reluctant to "restore order." When Soviet Ambassador Yuri Andropov called Lashchenko on October 23 around 17:00 and asked him to send his troops to liquidate the disorder in Budapest, Malashenko heard Lashchenko reply that that was a task only for the Hungarian police, state security services, and soldiers. For one thing, intervention went beyond his authority, and for another "it was not desirable to bring Soviet troops into something like this." (p. 222) Lashchenko also told Andropov: "Our troops can only be ordered into action by the Soviet minister of defense and the chief of staff, by a decree of the Soviet government."

Undergraduate students would find this book difficult to read due to the abundant statistics and lack of analysis. Many parts, like the "Mosaic of Resistance," pp 109-114, resemble chronologies and lists of statistics. Scholars familiar with the crisis will find this useful, but even they will find the lack of an index rather frustrating.

The main strength of this book is that it draws on a wide variety of documents and documentary collections from several Hungarian archives and one Soviet archive that were declassified after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[10] The "1956-os Intezet" (Institute for the Study of the 1956 Revolution) in Budapest has published a plethora of books and documents, but unfortunately very few have been translated into English. Thus Gyorkei's volume is a good start and will serve as a helpful reference work, containing as it does tables, maps, and biographical notes. Only two other books incorporating the new documentary evidence on the 1956 crisis have been published in English since the end of the Cold War.[11] Finally, I believe Malashenko is correct that this book helps to "contribute to the reconciliation of our peoples [Hungarian and Russian]."

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Gyorgy Csepeli, *National Identity in Contemporary Hungary* (NY: Columbia University Press, Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, no. 91, 1997). My review of this appears in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 27, no. 4 (December 1999).

[2]. *Szovjet katonai intervencio 1956* (Budapest: Argumentum Kiado, 1996).

[3]. The Hungarian Parliament passed a resolution on May 2, 1990 classifying the events of 1956 as a "revolution" and "war of independence."

[4]. For more information on the Brioni meeting and Yugoslavia's role, see my articles, "Hungary, 1956: the Yugoslav Connection," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 50, no. 3 (May 1998), pp. 493-518; and "The Soviet-Yugoslav Detente, Belgrade-Budapest Relations, and the Hungarian Revolution (1955-56)," *Hungarian Studies Review*, vol. XXIV, nos. 1-2 (1998), pp. 15-64.

[5]. Vladimir Nikoforovich Malin, the head of the CPSU CC General Department during the entire Khrushchev period, took copious notes of all presidium meetings, although verbatim transcripts were not kept in the 1950s. The original handwritten copy is available to all researchers at the Central Committee archive in Moscow (Tsentr Khraneniya Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii, or TKhSD), Fond 3, Opis' 12, Delo 1005-06. They were first published in Hungarian. See Vyacheslav Sereda and Janos M. Rainer, eds. *Dontes a Kremlben, 1956: A szovjet partelnokseg vitai Magyarorszagrol* (Budapest: 1956-os Intezet, 1996). The Russian version was published later that year. See "Kak reshalis voprosy Vengrii: Rabochie zapisi zasedanii Prezidiuma TsK KPSS, iyul'-noyabr' 1956 g.," *Istoricheskii Arkhiv* (Moscow), no. 2 (1996): 73-104, no. 3 (1996): 87-121, respectively.

[6]. In addition to Sereda and Rainer, eds. *Dontes a Kremlben, 1956*, the document collections include *Hianyzo Lapok: 1956 tortenetebol: Dokumentumok a volt SZKP KP Leveltarabol* (Budapest: Zenit Konyvek, 1993); *Jelcin-dosszie Szoviet dokumentumok 1956 rol* (Budapest: Dohany, 1993); *TOP SECRET: Magyar-Jugoszlav Kapcsolatok, 1956*; and *1956-os Intezet-Evkonyv 1992.*

[7]. Approximate figures have been published in Russian sources from the early 1990s. See, for example, G. F. Krivosheyev, ed. *Grif Sekretnosti Sniat: Poteri Vooruzhonnykh Sil SSSR v Voinakh, Boievykh Deistviyakh i Boievykh Konfliktakh, Statisticheskoye Issledovaniye* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993), p. 397.

[8]. See Granville, "In the Line of Fire: the Soviet Crackdown on Hungary, 1956-1958," *Carl Beck Papers* , no 1307 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Center for Russian and East European Studies, December 1998). As General-Lieutenant Lashchenko informed Ambassador Andropov (who forwarded the message to the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the USSR, V. V. Kuznetsov), "Lately a series of attacks and beatings have been inflicted on completely innocent soldiers of the Soviet army by Hungarian citizens." He went on to describe how six Soviet soldiers on three different occasions were beaten with knives and rocks on their way home in the evening. In each case, Hungarian legal authorities did not hold the perpetrators ("hooligans") accountable. Further tensions were caused in another episode. The Soviet military official, Maj. A. N. Pliukhin, completely sober, was run over by a Hungarian truck driver breaking the speed limit. Rather than fine the latter, the chief Procurator Endre Szenvedi maintained that Pliukhin was at fault for being intoxicated. Russian Archive of Foreign Policy, F. 077, Op. 37, D. 18, P. 188, ll. 16-20, 25. "Ot General-Mayora Sokolova Rukovoditeliu Pyatovo Evropeiskovo Otdela Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del, Kuznetsovy, 7-ovo Avgusta 1956.

[9]. Lieut.-General Evgenii I. Malashenko, "Osobyi Korpus v Ogne Budapeshta," *Voenno-istoricheskii Zhurnal* (Moscow), Nos. 10, 11, and 12 (October, November, and December 1993) and No. 1 (January 1994), pp. 22-30; 44-51; 33-37; and 30-36, respectively.

[10]. In Hungary these archives include the Military Archive, the Interior Ministry Archive, the Historical Archive, and the Hungarian National Archive; in Russia: the Center for the Preservation of Contemporary Documentation.

[11]. Gyorgy Litvan, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt And Repression, 1953-1963*, trans. Janos M. Bak and Lyman H. Legters (NY: Longman, 1996), and Terry Cox, ed., *Hungary 1956: Forty Years On* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

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