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The Illuminations of Retrogressive Determinism: New Documents on the Hungarian Revolution

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New Documents on the Hungarian Revolution

This collection of documents on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution—perhaps the last in Europe that can be called truly “spontaneous”—is well worth its hefty price and reflects the painstaking efforts of an international team of prominent researchers. Csaba Bekes and Janos Rainer (two prolific scholars from the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in Budapest) and Malcolm Byrne (research director of the National Security Archive, Washington, DC) edited this third volume in the series of Cold War readers published by Central European University Press in collaboration with the National Security Archive. Bekes is the author of numerous articles and documentary collections in Hungarian and English about the international dimensions of the Hungarian revolution.[1] Rainer has written several books and articles on the revolution, including a two-volume biography of Imre Nagy.[2] This series of Cold War readers is part of the “Openness in Russia and Eastern Europe Project.” Other documentary collections in the series include *The Prague Spring, 1968* (1998) compiled and edited by Jaromir Navratil et al. and *Uprising in East Germany, 1953* (2001) compiled and edited by Christian Ostermann.[3]

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents presents a total of 120 documents from seven archives (Russian, Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Romanian, U.S., and British). The volume also contains three essays averaging 20 pages each which provide a detailed narrative account of the revolution; bibliography; index; ex-

tensive footnotes; maps; glossary of names and organizations; list of acronyms and abbreviations; chronology of events; photographs; and three introductory essays by Arpad Goncz (former Hungarian president), Charles Gati (Johns Hopkins University), and Timothy Garton Ash (Hoover Institution, Stanford University), respectively.

Ash’s essay is particularly useful in posing provocative questions. Do we know more about an event the further we get away from it, or the closer we are to it? Could Khrushchev have done in 1956 what Mikhail Gorbachev did in 1989? The British historian warns the reader against what Henri Bergson, the French philosopher, termed “the illusions of retrogressive determinism”—believing that what happened had to happen (p. xx).

Readers of this volume will no doubt become more vulnerable to this form of illusion, for the documents go a long way to elucidate Soviet, Hungarian, and U.S. decision making. Topics covered in the volume include “the legacy of the revolution in Hungary, new evidence on Soviet policy toward Hungary, the uprising’s impact on Eastern Europe and its relation to the Polish crisis, the impact on the superpowers, the role of Radio Free Europe (RFE), and the connections between the events of 1956 and 1989” (p. xxviii).

Specifically, documents in Part One (“Hungary Before the Revolution”) cover the hardliner Matyas Rakosi’s purges of January 1953, his attempts to sabotage Imre Nagy’s reformist “New Course,” Nagy’s stubborn refusal to recant and consequent expulsion from the Hungarian

Communist Party, and other topics. In this section the reader will find the notes of the meetings in Moscow on June 13 and 16, 1953 between the Soviet Presidium and Hungarian Workers Party delegation that precipitated Rakosi's demotion as Prime Minister and Nagy's assumption of that position. In addition, the section contains a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (January 10, 1956); four National Security Council (NSC) documents; a U.S. Army Intelligence Study of resistance potential in Hungary (January 1956); two British Foreign Office memoranda; two reports by Yuri Andropov (Soviet Ambassador in Hungary); the notes taken during a secret Soviet Presidium meeting on October 20, 1956 by Vladimir Malin; the "sixteen points" prepared by Hungarian students on October 22-23, 1956; and others. (Vladimir Malin was head of the General Department of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. He took notes of the secret emergency sessions of the Presidium at the height of the crisis, between October 23 and November 4. Since official verbatim minutes of these sessions were never kept, the "Malin Notes" shed unique insight on the Soviet decision making process.)

Documents in Part Two cover the events from the student demonstration (October 23, 1956) to the second Soviet intervention (November 4, 1956). These include minutes of the October 28 meeting of the Hungarian Politburo; notes by Jan Svoboda, a top aide for Czech leader Antonin Novotny of a secret emergency meeting in Moscow on October 24, 1956 of all the leaders of the Warsaw Pact; a memorandum of the NSC meeting on October 26; more Malin Notes; and others. Here the reader gets a close-up look at the Soviet waffling on October 28. Although Nikita Khrushchev and his colleagues knew that the situation in Hungary was deteriorating and the people were becoming increasingly "anti-Soviet," all of them—except Kliment Voroshilov, perhaps—agreed on that day that they should adopt the peaceful path and support the Nagy government. But they were worried. Khrushchev posed the question: "Will we have a government that is with us, or will there be a government that is not with us and will request the withdrawal of [Soviet] troops? ...There is no firm leadership there, neither in the party nor in the government. The uprising has spread into the provinces. The [Hungarian] troops might go over to the side of the insurgents" (p. 264). Most of the Soviet leaders had agreed on the need to withdraw troops at least from the city of Budapest; negotiations about the complete withdrawal of troops from Hungary could begin later.

However, just three days later, as Malin's notes indi-

cate, Khrushchev changed his mind. During a meeting on October 31, the Presidium reached a final decision to intervene. Khrushchev reportedly said, "We should re-examine our assessment and should not withdraw our troops from Hungary and Budapest. We should take the initiative in restoring order in Hungary. If we depart from Hungary, it will give a great boost to the Americans, English, and French: the imperialists. They will perceive it as weakness on our part and will go onto the offensive. To Egypt they will then add Hungary. We have no other choice" (p. 307). For the leaders of the post-Stalinist Kremlin, as Bekes, Byrne, and Rainer make clear, the satellite-like status of the East European countries was never really a negotiable item.

The essay and documents in Part Two also illuminate the formidable bravery and ingenuity of the street fighters. As the editors explain, local party and military leaders were able to maintain control of most of the demonstrations on October 24 due to the curfew and sparse information about what was happening. Yet, the massacre the next day, in which at least 100 Hungarians were killed and 300 wounded, transformed the street fighters into professional insurgents, forcing the Moscow leaders to choose between a political solution and a military crackdown.

A measure of the insurgents' success can be attributed to the Soviets' lack of infantry support. Tanks were easily trapped in Budapest's narrow streets, becoming sitting ducks for homemade Molotov cocktails. At other times, outnumbered young fighters invented cheap and effective countermeasures. They placed frying pans in the roads to resemble anti-tank mines and poured oil in front of the tanks as they rolled by, thus igniting them. The burning tanks then made good barricades.

Documents in Part Three ("Hungary in the Aftermath") cover the "normalization" process, reprisals against the insurgents, the quisling Janos Kadar's efforts to consolidate his unpopular regime, and the reactions to the Hungarian crisis by the UN and United States. A more complete portrait of Janos Kadar emerges in this section. Although he shared Moscow's basic ideas, calling the uprising a "counterrevolution" and denouncing the brutal lynching of communists, he told his Soviet colleagues that the uprising was broad-based. "The whole nation is taking part in the movement," he insisted. The Soviet troops would have to leave Hungary, Kadar thought (p. 214).

Interesting, too, are the editors' insights about Kadar's shift in attitude during the normalization pro-

cess. At the outset he urged the Kremlin leaders to ease up on the arrests and deportations. Later, after Imre Nagy and his supporters (who took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy) were arrested, flown to Romania, and could no longer challenge his legitimacy, Kadar clamped down on the insurgents. There was still another reason for Kadar's new toughness. While still in Moscow on November 1-2, he apparently thought he could negotiate with the Hungarian people, working toward gradual reform. He was shocked at the vehemence of the popular resistance. He even thought Nagy might support his regime, and—although unlikely—perhaps even join him as “number two” in the Hungarian leadership.

The reprisals he authorized were brutal. According to the editors, “between December 1956 and the summer of 1961, when the last death sentence was carried out for offenses committed in 1956, 341 people were hanged, as many as in the darkest years of the Rakosi regime.” (p. 375) Moreover, roughly 13,000 people were sent to internment camps at Tokol and Kistarcsa between 1957 and 1960. “Tens of thousands were banned from their homes, dismissed from their jobs (including over 1,000 teachers, mostly outside Budapest), or placed under police supervision.” (p. 375)

Once the Hungarian people were cowed—at least outwardly—Kadar offered carrots to accompany the sticks. One learned to “shut up and go along,” and the rewards would follow. Consumer goods increased in the stores, and one had a wider variety to choose from. One would could get a tourist visa and buy up to \$70 worth of foreign currency. University applications no longer contained the category “social background.” One was no longer forced to attend political seminars at work or to read and discuss the party newspaper. Canned applause no longer followed official speeches. For the first time one could conduct a private life with relatively little state intervention.

Bekes, Byrne, and Rainer also include eighteen high-level U.S. documents in this collection. The United States' reaction to the Hungarian crisis, while embarrassing, fits a pattern in American foreign policy. Although willing to spend considerable sums on RFE and underground Eastern European emigre organizations to encourage the “liberation of the captive nations,” U.S. policymakers hoped the “satellites” would liberate themselves (p. 2). One can see that psychological warfare and covert operations were the ultimate “quick fix” for Washington—fast, cheap, and secret. They minimized U.S. casualties and offered the White House the option of “plausible deniability” if

they backfired.

By 1956—a year after the Geneva conference—Eisenhower and Dulles were loath to jeopardize the process of detente and perhaps trigger a nuclear war. We now know that State Department had contemplated the implications of Hungarian neutrality, even before Nagy's announcement on November 1. While Eisenhower himself sympathized with the idea, he hesitated to “take on a difficult international obligation in the event the Hungarian uprising was suppressed” (p. 212).

The editors also address the role of RFE during the Hungarian revolution, incorporating four documents pertaining to broadcasting or balloon-leaflet operations. Included in Part Three, specifically, is a thoughtful memo written on December 5, 1956 by the late William Griffith, who had served in 1956 as the Political Advisor in Munich supervising the individual East European radios, including the Radio Free Hungary staff. Addressed to another RFE official, Richard Condon, the memo was first disclosed at an international historians' conference in Budapest on September 26-29, 1996 marking the fortieth anniversary of the revolution. In the memo Griffith acknowledged that sixteen RFE programs involved “distortions of policy or serious failure to employ constructive techniques of policy application” (pp 460-463).

One serious distortion was to praise Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty and defame Imre Nagy. Although the editors do not mention it, this seems to fit another pattern in U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War: a prejudice against communism that rendered policymakers blind to the existence of popular, scrupulous communists. This prejudice led them to discredit national communists such as Imre Nagy of Hungary and Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam and to prefer non-communists such as the Catholics Mindszenty of Hungary and Ngo Dinh Diem of Vietnam, however unsuitable the latter were as true leaders.

Finally, the volume contains a “documentary epilogue” with official Soviet and Hungarian statements by Boris Yeltsin and Imre Pozsgay respectively, acknowledging that the 1956 event was not a counterrevolution, but a popular uprising.

Scholars of the Hungarian Revolution will notice that many of the key documents (Russian and Hungarian) included in the volume that shed direct light on the decision making process have already been translated into English in the mid-1990s in the Woodrow Wilson Center's International Cold War History Bulletin.[4] Others came to light during the abovementioned conference in Budapest

in September 1996. Organized primarily by the 1956 Institute, this conference was unique in bringing together both original participants in the 1956 events and scholars who have worked with the new archival documents, thus enabling one to compare archival findings with living memories. A preliminary reader consisting of eighteen documents was distributed to the conference participants.[5] Nevertheless, scholars and general readers alike will find *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution* extremely handy in collecting these and many more documents under one cover.

Let us return to Timothy Garton Ash's provocative questions. Do we know more about an event the further we get away from it, or the closer we are to it? On the one hand, he posits, "history with a small 'h' is simply lost." (p. xxi) We will never know, for example, what it was like for the street fighters "in the eye of the storm" who lost their lives. On the other hand, the German historian Leopold von Ranke was correct: with the passage of time and greater availability of documents, we actually know more about the event.

Distance certainly helps us to discern the ironies in Hungarian history. At the time Ash wrote his essay, in 1996 shortly after the conference commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution, the Hungarian Socialist Party—successor to the communist party—dominated the government. The Prime Minister then was Gyula Horn, who as a 24-year-old vigorously opposed the revolution, blaming it for the death of his elder brother. Just as Imre Nagy while Prime Minister in 1953 proposed a tribute to Stalin (the patron of his archrival Rakosi), so Horn joined Nagy's daughter in a ceremony at Plot 301 to mark the anniversary of the revolution (p. xxiv). Also ironic is the way in which right-wing political parties in Hungary today "try to make 1956 theirs and theirs alone," as Gati points out in his essay (p. xvi).

Distance from an event also helps us to see the benefits of an event. As Goncz points out in his essay, before 1956 many in the West viewed Hungary as an insignificant "satellite" that needed to be "liberated" (p. xiii). Had the Hungarians not fought the Soviet army courageously in 1956, the West might still have regarded Hungary primarily as Germany's ally in both world wars and as an oppressor of minorities when part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Other beneficial consequences of the revolution and Soviet crackdown (from the West's perspective) include the bitter disillusionment of leftists around the world, the acceleration of the Sino-Soviet

split, and greater leniency in Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe.

What about Ash's counterfactual questions? Had the Soviet Union not intervened in Hungary and allowed it to become neutral, would it have granted neutrality to Poland as well? Could Khrushchev have done in 1956 what Gorbachev did in 1989? Although Ash does not answer the latter question directly, most would probably say "no." In 1956—the most rigid period of the Cold War—Khrushchev's Soviet Union was too confident to give up its hard-won buffer states, and the United States too timid to challenge the other superpower for fear of igniting a nuclear war. By 1989 Gorbachev's Soviet Union had been hemorrhaging too long from the war in Afghanistan and had become discouraged by Reagan's brash Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars"). In that atmosphere the Eastern European states had become a financial burden.

One counterfactual question Ash does not ask concerns the role of personality in history. Had Imre Nagy's personality been different, would the Khrushchev leadership have killed him? Probably not. The Kremlin leaders expected him to support the Kadar regime to save his career (or at least his life). The Malin Notes show that Khrushchev thought it might be possible to include Nagy in the government even after the invasion. But Nagy's sense of dignity precluded compromise. He had tried that before—serving as an NKVD informer in Moscow in the 1930s—and, while it may have helped him to survive the Stalinist purges in the short run, it had not aided in the long run. As a man of principle and integrity, Nagy could not tolerate Soviet hypocrisy and savagery, experiencing the acute sense of betrayal and waste of time and effort that compels one to say and mean literally: over my dead body will I ever work with you people again.

Nagy was not a stubborn or inept politician, but a statesman with foresight. With his death he was protesting the sick system of *samokritika* and fighting for the human freedom to tell the truth. Indeed, had Nagy's personality been different, the revolution would have lost much of its meaning and legacy. Nagy's martyrdom guaranteed that the Hungarian people would never forget what he died for. It was a wrong that had to be righted. Thus, to rephrase Bergson, one can also benefit from the "illuminations of retrogressive determinism."

In short, scholars and advanced graduate students will find this documentary collection to be an indispensable research tool.[6]

Notes:

[1]. See, for example, Csaba Bekes, *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom a világpolitikában: Tanulmány es valogatott dokumentumok* (Budapest: 1956-os Intezet, 1996); "The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1995): 109-21; and "New Findings on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 1-3.

[2]. See Janos Rainer, *Nagy Imre: Politikai eletrajz*, 2 vols. Budapest: 1956-os Intezet, 1996-1999; "The Other Side of the Story: Five Documents from the Yeltsin File," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 34, no. 129 (1993): 100-114; "The Yeltsin Dossier: Soviet Documents on Hungary, 1956," *Cold War International History Bulletin*, no. 5 (Fall 1995): 22, 24-27.

[3]. Navratil's edited volume was reviewed earlier on HABSBERG. See <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=11490928517680>.

[4]. See, for example, the Spring 1995 issue of the

Cold War International History Bulletin, pp. 1, 50-56. An English translation and annotation of the Malin Notes appears in the Winter 1996 issue, pp. 385-410

[5]. Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne, and Christian Ostermann, eds. *The Hidden History of Hungary 1956: A Compendium of Declassified Documents* (Washington, DC: National Security Archive, 1996).

[6]. Other edited works incorporating new archival findings include Gyorgy Litvan et al., *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression, 1953-1963* (NY: Longman, 1996); Terry Cox, *Hungary 1956-Forty Years On* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); and Jenő Györkei and Miklos Horvath, *The Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999). For an analytical monograph in English focusing on the decision making process and drawing on still other new documents, see Johanna Granville, *The First Domino: International Decision Making in the 1956 Hungarian Crisis* (Texas A & M University Press, 2004).

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