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# THE UNEXPECTED REVOLUTION

Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising

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## PREFACE

The following study deals with the genesis of a revolutionary situation in Hungary, rather than with the revolutionary events themselves. Looking at the climax of October 23, 1956, one has the impression of a sudden jump from political stability to chaos. On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the political situation had been in flux for a number of years before the final explosion. Indeed, in Hungary, as well as in the other countries of East Central Europe that passed into the Soviet orbit, political and social changes of the greatest moment had been compressed into a decade. The totalitarian rigidity of Stalinism was imposed upon these nations abruptly, almost without any period of transition. With Stalin gone, the inevitable relaxation of his system in the Soviet Union released a number of centrifugal, disruptive tendencies in the dependent territories. My purpose has been to show the interrelated social and political effects both of the forcible imposition of the Stalinist pattern and of its disintegration. Hungary, as an extreme case in both respects, offers particularly instructive evidence concerning the mechanism of the two processes.

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## *Preface*

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P. K.

## THE UNEXPECTED REVOLUTION

## CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction, *1*
  - 2 From Coalition to Purge, *9*
  - 3 The New Course and Its Aftermath, *40*
  - 4 The Writers' Revolt, *55*
  - 5 The Disintegration of Authority, *71*
  - 6 Submission and Insubordination, *83*
  - 7 Political Control and Institutional Environment, *92*
  - 8 Patterns of Revolutionary Behavior, *106*
  - 9 Stability and Instability, *119*
  - 10 Conclusions, *149*
- Notes, *161*
- Bibliography, *169*
- Index, *173*

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Hungarian uprising of October 1956 was a dramatic, sudden explosion, apparently not organized beforehand by a revolutionary center; neither outsiders nor the participants themselves had anticipated anything like the irresistible revolutionary dynamism that would sweep the country. Not that premonitory signs of trouble to come were lacking. The Communist regime had visibly lost much of its authority and prestige. Its top leadership was publicly denounced and ridiculed in Party organs, and the Party leader himself, Mátyás Rákosi, was suddenly and somewhat mysteriously removed from his post in July. It was an open secret that the Party was torn by factional struggles and that once more, like three years before, a change of course was in the offing.

One can say in retrospect that the divisions within the Party's leadership, and the growing alienation of the regime's literary spokesmen, set the stage for the popular uprising that was to shake the Communist state to its foundations. Yet, up to the actual outbreak of the revolution, the stirrings of opposition and agitation for reform had very much the character of an internal family affair within the Party itself. Nothing indicated that the masses could, or would, take matters into their own hands. The upsurge of the anonymous mass as an active political force was a fantastic *coup de théâtre* which ended the regime's creeping internal crisis with a thunderclap and posed the problem of political change anew, in an infinitely more radical form.



## *Introduction*

This sequence indicates that there were two separate processes contributing to political instability before the revolution,\* one confined to strata within, or close to, the center of the Communist power apparatus itself, the other spreading throughout the broad, anonymous masses. These two processes will be called, for brevity's sake, the "elite" process and the "mass" process. The elite process was a gradual one. It manifested itself in various ways, ranging from personal and clique rivalries (found at all times in all Communist parties) to violent purges and their repercussions, and novel, exceptional forms of defiance from within the apparatus. In contrast to the gradual pattern of the elite process, the mass process took a discontinuous, jerky course: a long period of incubation, during which popular bitterness found practically no overt, public expression and was subdued even in its private manifestations, gave way abruptly to a period of total insubordination.

The revolution itself was the joint product of these two processes. One must assume that the incubation period of the masses would not have culminated in open insurrection if it had not been for the cumulative effect of the elite process steadily undermining the stability of the regime. In fact, repressed popular opposition had existed in every satellite country, but actual outbreaks occurred only where, as in Hungary, the Communist top elite became severely divided or disoriented. Nor would quarrels within the Communist political elite have led to a collapse of the regime if the masses had not entered upon the scene. Factional struggles as such involve only a regrouping within the political elite; the final result of this may be, and

\* If the term revolution is used exclusively to designate a radical political overturn giving rise to a new regime, and precluding the restoration of the old, the events of October 1956 in Hungary cannot be called a revolution but merely a revolt. It should be noted, however, that the Communist regime would have been eliminated for good if it had not been for Soviet military intervention. Therefore, if only internal political forces are taken into account, October 1956 was a revolution.

## Introduction

often has been, a stronger, more complete control being exercised by the Party than before. Admittedly, in the pre-revolutionary period, the struggle within the elite involved not only personal and factional rivalries but also matters of principle: Rákosi's opponents in 1956 were calling for moral regeneration and a drastic reform of antipopular governmental practices. Their aim, however, was not to destroy the regime but to make it accepted and popular. It was only the dynamism of the masses which pushed events beyond mere reform from within.

In the following pages, an attempt will be made to show the interrelation between the elite pattern and the mass pattern of pre-revolutionary events. The mass pattern cannot be treated in detail, since it has left no articulate record of its development. It can only be tentatively reconstructed from the few brief instances of open opposition manifested by the masses and from interviews with ordinary people who had gone through the experience of Communist rule and its dramatic crisis in the revolution. Throughout the discussion, the emphasis will be on the *direction* of the events toward the revolutionary climax, and upon the mutually reinforcing effect the two processes had upon each other.

The division within the elite, however, has left ample record, and its history will be traced from the end of World War II and the emergence of Soviet-directed Communism as a major political force in Hungary. Chapter 2 introduces the most important elements confronting one another within the Party—the indigenous underground on the one hand, and the cadres returning from exile in Soviet Russia on the other. It will be shown that neither group was an autonomous agent; the balance of power was held throughout by the supreme Party authorities in Moscow to which all local Communists had to look for support in their maneuvers.

But the image of a three-person game, with two local contenders and an outside arbiter, does not give a true idea of the

## *Introduction*

complexities of the situation. None of the principal groups in the drama had complete solidarity even within itself: there were personal rivalries and differences in outlook both within the main local groupings of Communists and within the Moscow leadership. Nor was the Party operating as a self-contained unit. As in all the Soviet-controlled or Soviet-manipulated countries of what was to become the satellite empire, the Communists were engaged in the grim business of imposing totalitarian control upon a recalcitrant society, using terror both to intimidate opponents and “class enemies” and to split, demoralize, and finally assimilate temporary allies. In the present context, however, attention will be directed mainly to those political trends and events in the Party that in one way or another contributed to the eventual disintegration of the Communist power structure. Chief among these were the mass purges of 1949 and the following years; the Communist state’s all-out drive toward industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture; and, finally, the bankruptcy of this drive and the attempts of the post-Stalin regime in Moscow to repair the damage by policies of retreat and relaxation.

Chapter 3 deals with the first of these retreats, the New Course initiated by Stalin’s successors. The relaxation dictated by Moscow occurred in smooth and gradual fashion in most of the satellite countries; but in Hungary it involved a highly dramatized revamping of basic policies and a change of government, Imre Nagy, a critic of collectivization and forced industrialization, being named Premier.<sup>1</sup> The regime never fully recovered from this abrupt change. The main policies of the New Course—concessions to the peasantry, relaxation of terror, and the shift of emphasis from industrialization to satisfaction of consumers’ needs—might have had a soothing effect, had those responsible for the old, ruthless course been removed from the political scene altogether. Rákosi and his clique, however,

<sup>1</sup> Numbered notes will be found at the back of the book, pp. 161–67.

## Introduction

retained control of the Party and used their power to sabotage the New Course and undermine Nagy's position. The regime was thus prevented from reaping the potential benefits of relaxation while it did suffer from its disruptive effects. The easing of police terror encouraged active opposition to the system within the agricultural masses, as well as insubordination within the Party apparatus. What caused the most serious breach in the Party was the fact that the New Course put on its agenda the highly sensitive matter of Rákosi's terror against Party members. Moscow had insisted on this, without considering the political dangers inherent in opening up a moral chasm between the top Party leadership and the lower echelons.

One of the main themes of the present study, the political significance of irreconcilable moral conflicts within the Communist elite, will be taken up in Chapter 4, which deals with the revolt of the Communist intellectuals. As has already been mentioned, the mainsprings of this literary opposition were primarily moral ones. Chapter 5 shows how a second wave of relaxation of control, the "thaw" signaled by the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in February 1956, opened more public channels for the intellectuals' opposition, and how the resulting ferment undermined the authority of the regime.

The Communist writers, in attacking the top leadership, hoped to gain a point of contact with the masses. Previously, they had extolled Communism for having freed the workers and peasants from capitalist and feudal oppression. Now they realized, to their mortification, that the people themselves had a different view of the situation, and that the workers and peasants, though by no means anxious to restore the *ancien régime*, felt thoroughly alienated from the new system. The writers hoped to get a sympathetic response by acknowledging their error and holding out hopes for redress. The masses, however, remained reserved and noncommittal. Indeed, one of the characteristic features of the pre-revolutionary incubation period was the contrast between the sullen silence maintained

## *Introduction*

by the bulk of the people (peasants and industrial workers) and the intelligentsia's considerable propensity for self-expression. This is examined in Chapter 6.

The silence of the masses was, of course, a direct result of the control apparatus of the regime. This was not only a matter of police terror. Chapter 7 shows how the various new institutional environments created by the Communists enabled the regime to use a variety of economic and administrative techniques, in addition to propaganda and terror, to ensure discipline and subordination. Among the peasantry, passive resistance could not be stamped out completely; but, by and large, the masses maintained outward conformity. There was no way of telling how deep or widespread a disaffection existed among them. Indeed, such was the success of the Communist control apparatus that most of the people, left to themselves, had no awareness of any deep current of feeling potentially uniting them.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Hungarian revolution was the rapidity with which a national consensus crystallized after the outbreak. This is the main topic treated in Chapter 8, which deals with the revolution itself. It is shown here how the mass pattern of revolution, latent until street fighting began, suddenly took over from the elite pattern, rendering all debates about internal reform of the system irrelevant. The people themselves, noncommittal and voiceless beforehand, defined the issue unambiguously as that of national liberation. Opposition to Russian occupation had been the hidden current which, unknown to the people, had created a unity of feeling among them.

Discussion of both the elite and the mass pattern is largely based upon interviews with Hungarians who lived through the pre-revolutionary period and the revolution, and subsequently escaped to the West. Between December 1956 and August 1957, I interviewed thirty-seven Hungarian refugees; twenty-

## *Introduction*

five of these interviews were held between December 1956 and July 1957 in the United States (in New York, New Haven, and Washington), and twelve (with Hungarians who had fled after the revolution) took place in July and August 1957 in Europe (in London, Paris, Brussels, and Feldafing in Bavaria). Those interviewed in the United States belonged to all walks of life; they included peasants, workers, intellectuals, army officers, and anti-Communist political figures. The European group of respondents consisted of Hungarian intellectuals of various backgrounds, notably some ex-Communist writers who had been active in the Party opposition prior to the revolution. I also examined transcripts of over a hundred interviews collected in the Columbia University Project on the Hungarian Revolution.

Interviews of this kind raise many problems of bias, credibility, and representativeness. To begin with, the political opinions expressed in the interviews were particularly subject to "interviewer's bias," a tendency to say those things that would create a favorable impression. This bias may also have colored factual statements about the respondent's own role and about conditions in general; and further distortion may have resulted from incomplete knowledge, uncritical reasoning, and many other factors. Finally, the refugees did not represent a random sample of the Hungarian population, so that it would have been improper to impute any distribution of attitudes found among them to the population as a whole.

I have tried to eliminate errors due to these factors as best I could. In order to reduce "interviewer's bias," interviews were arranged on a personal basis, so as not to give them a character of official or officially sponsored interrogation. Moreover, direct questioning about political attitudes and beliefs was avoided. Instead, the respondents were encouraged to reminisce about personal experiences. The analysis was based upon spontaneously produced biographical material, rather than, say, upon

## *Introduction*

the respondents' political value judgments. This type of material, contained both in my own interviews and in those of the Columbia Project, suggested certain patterns of experience apparently typical of various social groups (industrial workers, white-collar employees, peasants, intellectuals, and young people).

As regards these broad, characteristic patterns of experience, I treated the respondents as indeed representative of their respective social groups. There is, in fact, no reason to assume that the refugees as a group were atypical in these respects. Although the self-selection of the refugees clearly did lead to over- and underrepresentation of many sociological and attitude variables (occupation, religion, party affiliation, and so on), one still could not say that the respondents included a large number of marginal or deviant elements within their own social groups. As regards their major life experiences, they were just ordinary people. Hence, their reminiscences could be used to reconstruct, tentatively and in broad outline, the various processes that were going on at different social levels and that culminated in the October Revolution.

In Chapter 9, events in Hungary are compared with analogous processes observed elsewhere in the satellite area, notably East Germany and Poland. A concluding chapter, based upon the case material previously presented, draws some tentative general conclusions about factors of political instability inherent in Communist regimes.

## 2

# FROM COALITION TO PURGE

### THE "ANTIFASCIST" COALITION

The entry of Soviet troops into Hungary in the autumn of 1944 made the Hungarian Communist Party virtually the decisive political power in the country. The existing state apparatus collapsed; there was a complete political vacuum. Small as the Communist Party was, it could have proclaimed the "dictatorship of the proletariat," had this been the Soviet government's policy at that time. Moscow, however, had different plans. It discouraged the immediate establishment of Soviet-type one-party governments in the countries from which the Germans had been driven by the Russian armies. Instead, the Soviets insisted upon organizing civil government in the liberated countries on a multi-party basis. The Communists were to participate in these governments alongside non-Communist (Social Democratic and even bourgeois) parties certified as "antifascist" by the occupation authorities.

The Soviet government's reasons for preferring this coalition blueprint to the immediate introduction of the Communist one-party state in the liberated territories cannot be detailed here. One of the reasons certainly was that Stalin was anxious not to antagonize the Western Allies as long as strong American and British armies were deployed on European soil; in addition, he probably was moved by other considerations, such as the need for the quick resumption of economic activities. In any case,



### *From Coalition to Purge*

the coalition system as conceived by Moscow, although superficially similar to parliamentary democracy, departed from it in one essential respect. Unlike parliamentary coalitions of the normal kind, the “antifascist” coalitions of this new type were meant to be permanent and unchangeable in composition. This assured the Communists of unchallengeable tenure in all positions they had pre-empted, such as the ministries controlling the police and the courts. If and when they decided to use their power against their coalition partners, these partners would have no means of recourse. The “antifascist” coalition blueprint was so contrived that only the Communists could gain power within the coalition at their partners’ expense. Thus, it was an effective device by which to prepare the ground for a delayed seizure of exclusive power by the Communist Party. No political grouping could hope to stave off this development indefinitely, what with the Communist Party enjoying the full support of Soviet military might, police power, and economic dominance. We shall see later by what methods the Hungarian Communists hollowed out the coalition system set up under the auspices of the Soviet military government.

### *The Communist Underground*

The first step after liberation, however, was to form an “antifascist” coalition government, with the Communists in the beginning merely playing the role of junior partners. In Hungary, even this first step was difficult, for the country had no indigenous Communist movement to speak of. Not only had the Hungarian Communist Party been illegal since 1919; it was particularly impotent even as illegal parties go, because the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 had left unhappy memories in all social classes. Elsewhere in Europe, Communist agitation, open or clandestine, could play upon the expectations of the dissatisfied, unencumbered by any Communist governmental record; in Hungary, however, there was