

Hungary 1956: A revolution against Stalinism

Part one

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25 October 2006

This month marks the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most seminal episodes in the post-war history of Eastern Europe—the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks. We are reprinting here the first of a two-part article dealing with the historical and political background to the popular uprising against the Stalinist bureaucracy, which was first published in the International Workers Bulletin, the printed forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site, in February of 1997. The original German version appeared in December 1996 in the German newspaper Neue Arbeiterpresse.

The second part was posted Thursday, October 26.

Fifty years on, the Hungarian Revolution of autumn 1956 remains the subject of contradictory explanations and many historical distortions.

Apologists for the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy present the bloody suppression of the uprising as a justified response to a fascist counterrevolution, while imperialist powers seek to confer on it the mantle of a heroic struggle against communism in favor of bourgeois democracy and capitalist restoration. They portray it as the beginning of a movement which culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the triumph of capitalism throughout Eastern Europe.

An examination of the events of autumn 1956 reveals that it was neither of these. The Hungarian Revolution was a tragically unsuccessful attempt by the Hungarian working class to bring down the ruling Stalinist regime and erect organs of workers' power, thus opening the way for a genuine socialist society.

Hungary in the years following the Second World War was still an economically backward and overwhelmingly agrarian country. But the working class, although small and concentrated in a few places, possessed strong revolutionary traditions. Under the leadership of the Communist Party in 1918-19, Bela Kun sought to establish a soviet republic after the model of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia.

The undertaking ended bloodily with a right-wing coup, in no small measure due to serious political mistakes made by Kun. The Horthy regime which came to power rested on the fascist gangs of the Szalasi. Horthy later became one of the most loyal allies of the Nazis. In the 1930s, thousands of resistance fighters, mainly from the workers' movement, were deported or murdered.

Many of the cadres of the Hungarian Communist Party who managed to evade the death squads and prisons of the Horthy regime and fled into exile in Paris, Spain or the Soviet Union later fell victim to the Stalinist purges. Those who returned to Hungary after 1945 and rose to assume leading positions had, as a rule, proved themselves loyal supporters of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Hungary after the war

After 1945, Hungarian workers were burning to settle accounts with the fascists and their backers within the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. They hoped that the presence of the Red Army would facilitate this. But in the deals struck between Stalin and the imperialists, Hungary was categorized as a vanquished country that had to pay reparations. The Stalinist-dominated Hungarian regime suppressed the Hungarian workers and held down their living standards in order to make the payments.

Despite the introduction at the end of the 1940s of elements of a planned economy, severely distorted by the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the reparation payments provoked a protracted economic crisis. Compounding the crisis, the forced collectivization of the peasants effectively put out of action 10 percent of the agricultural land.

Because of the Cold War, enormous investments flowed into the military-industrial complex and the Hungarian Peoples Army. At the same time, Hungary had to pay for the upkeep and supply of four Soviet divisions. Supplies for the civilian population were inadequate and the situation grew even worse at the beginning of the 1950s. Despite the claims of the bureaucracy to the contrary, living standards had fallen below the prewar level, while workers were confronted with ever-rising productivity targets and compelled to work more and more unpaid shifts.

The post-war bourgeois coalition government which was formed by the Communist Party on instructions from Moscow was unable to hold onto power. The Stalin loyalists who had returned from Moscow took full power into their hands in 1947. An omnipresent political police force called the AVH was formed almost entirely from elements of the old Horthy government.

The main task of the AVH was to hunt down the old resistance fighters and communists who had not been selected and trained in exile in Moscow, but had remained in Hungary to fight in the underground. Several purges strangled any form of political opposition to the party regime of the Stalin loyalist Mátyás Rákosi. Political show trials, power struggles inside the bureaucracy, cloak-and-dagger actions by the secret police, torture and executions characterized the political climate.

Following the break by Tito's Yugoslav Communist Party with Stalin, Tito became a pole of attraction for opposition elements both inside and outside the Communist parties. In Hungary, party purges and deportations increased. Between 1952 and 1956 alone, 1,136,434 people were put on trial, and more than half were given prison sentences. Almost a quarter of the entire population was subject to state persecution or police harassment.

Before the uprising

Following Stalin's death in 1953, and even more so after Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in

the spring of 1956, the hopes of workers in Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe began to rise. Their determination to defend themselves against the bureaucracy and its hated apparatus grew. Shortly after the uprising of the East German workers in 1953, 20,000 Hungarian steelworkers from the Mátyás-Rákosi plant in the industrial district of Csepel in Budapest took strike action. The action rapidly spread to other towns.

The government felt obliged to make considerable concessions to the workers. Fearing that the bureaucracy as a whole might lose control of the situation, Khrushchev intervened in Hungary. He replaced Rákosi with Imre Nagy, a popular figure as a result of land reforms implemented while he was minister of agriculture in 1945.

Nagy promised a “new course,” i.e., more consumer goods and a higher standard of living. This change proved, however, to be only a short-lived maneuver. After 18 months, Rákosi was put back in office. His return sparked considerable unrest, even inside the Hungarian CP, which continued up until 1956.

Things were also fermenting in neighboring Poland. On June 30, 1956, a rebellion of workers and students broke out in the town of Poznan. The army and security forces killed 41 people. In October of the same year, the crisis intensified to such a degree that the country faced the real threat of civil war and a split in the party. The Soviet army set off in the direction of Warsaw and Khrushchev traveled to the Polish capital, attempting to defuse the situation with some concessions.

An opposition bureaucrat, the “reformer” Wladyslaw Gomulka, was released from jail and made head of the Polish party. At the same time, the Soviet chiefs-of-staff of the Polish army were replaced with Polish officers. In this way the bureaucracy was able to temporarily stabilize its rule in Poland.

However, the fire spread to Hungary. In the spring of 1956, immediately following Khrushchev’s speech, violent protests erupted among intellectuals, writers and students against the Rákosi regime. The Communist Youth League established a discussion forum as a safety valve and named it after the Hungarian national poet Petöfi.

The Petöfi circle, as it was called, more and more became a forum for the entire political opposition to the regime. The youth and intellectuals demanded Rákosi’s removal and the “de-Stalinization” of Hungary.

The Soviet ambassador Yuri Andropov—later head of the KGB and Brezhnev’s successor as party chief—provided the Kremlin with detailed information on these events. The Soviet bureaucracy intervened once more to defuse the situation. Rákosi was again removed and brought to Moscow, where he remained until his death in 1971.

In his place came not the popular Imre Nagy as in 1953, but deputy party leader Ernő Gerő, who was no less hated than Rákosi. Gerő gained his reputation as a Stalinist butcher and torturer in Spain, and prior to 1945 he had enforced a 100 percent Moscow-true line on the exile party in Paris.

Gerő, promising reforms, released a few hundred political prisoners and made a demonstrative reconciliation with Tito. The latter, fearing a growth of worker unrest in Yugoslavia, had buried his differences with Moscow. But Gerő was not in a position to implement policies which had any credibility in the eyes of the masses. Unrest grew daily, above all among the youth.

Eventually, Gerő was forced to rehabilitate the former leader of the Hungarian CP Lázlo Rajk and his supporters. Rajk had been executed as a “Titoist” following a show trial in 1949. Rajk’s widow had publicly called for his rehabilitation and the punishment of his murderers, and this had been taken up by the Petöfi circle as one of its demands.

On October 6, a state funeral was held for Rajk and three of his collaborators. The same figures who had organized the execution of Rajk now delivered orations in his honor. But to their surprise and horror, some 200,000 people showed up to demonstrate their opposition to the regime.

The so-called reformers within the CP apparatus, no less than the hard-line Stalinists, were frightened by this mass mobilization. As a sop to the opposition, Gerő had a number of state security officers arrested and charged in the death of Rajk. But this had the opposite effect. Mistrust in the Stalinist bureaucracy intensified and the self-assurance of the masses grew.

Everywhere, small Petöfi circles sprang to life, expressing popular dissatisfaction with the economic and political situation and seeking to uncover all manner of crimes committed by the bureaucracy. The preeminent elements in these circles were students and intellectuals, above all from the technical faculties. Many of them came from working class families. But in the factories too, political discussions became more and more frequent, lasted longer and grew increasingly heated.

The uprising begins

On October 15, 1956, students in Szeged in southern Hungary formed their own student league and resigned from the Stalinist-controlled League of Working Youth. On October 22, they were followed by students from Budapest, who addressed demands to the party and government.

Among other things, the students called for freedom of expression and the press, free and secret elections, the right of other political parties to participate, the right of workers to strike, a check on productivity targets, and the reorganization of economic life.

There were three basic demands:

- The withdrawal of Soviet troops.

- Reelection of the top and middle-ranking party leadership by the rank-and-file by means of secret ballot elections, to be held within the shortest possible time. The calling of a party congress to elect a new central committee.

- The formation of a new government under the leadership of Imre Nagy. All leading functionaries from the Stalin period under Rákosi to be removed immediately.

There was also a call for public trials of the heads of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the state security agencies to hold them accountable for their crimes.

Another demand was for the “review and reorganization of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations in the fields of politics, economics and culture.”

There were demands that the Stalin monument be removed and replaced with a monument to the heroes of the Hungarian freedom struggle of 1848-49.

The students’ mobilization continued to spread. The universities were occupied. One political meeting followed another. The students turned to the workers and held spontaneous meetings at the factory gates, where they were received with increasing enthusiasm.

On October 23, the government banned a meeting called to show solidarity with the Polish uprising. Faced with the threat of mobilization of youth, the ban was lifted shortly after it was announced.

At 3 PM, 10,000 people assembled at the Petöfi monument in Budapest. To loud acclaim, a student read out the demands put to the government. That same afternoon, 200,000 people gathered at the monument to General Bem, one of the freedom fighters of 1848, where the author Péter Veres read out demands advanced by Hungarian writers, and a Polish writer brought greetings to the demonstrators.

The students had invited workers, officer cadets and soldiers to the rally, who turned out in their thousands. A delegation from the CP’s own party school, the Lenin Institute, marched with red flags and a large portrait of Lenin. The crowd sang by turns the Hungarian national anthem, the Marseillaise and the Internationale.

Later in the afternoon, the crowd, which had now grown to 300,000, moved to parliament square to listen to a speech by Nagy. The students were by now just a small minority of the assembled throng.

Nagy appeared on the balcony when it was dark and gave a short and confused speech. He promised to speak up for the crowd's demands in the Politburo and urged that peace and order be maintained. The crowd was visibly disappointed. With the increasing enthusiasm the demonstration took up the chant, "We will not stop half-way, Stalinism must be destroyed!"

Workers in tractors proceeded to the Stalin monument, intent on pulling it down. When they failed to topple it, they used a blowtorch to sever the statue above the feet. The colossus fell, leaving only a pair of giant empty shoes on the plinth. They hitched the statue to a truck and in triumph dragged it through the streets to the National Theater, where demonstrators spat on it.

In the meantime, another part of the demonstration had gathered at the radio broadcast offices. The students insisted that their demands be read over the airwaves. When the crowd tried to force its way into the building, AVH guards began shooting. The crowd began to chant, "The AVH are murderers! Death to the AVH!"

When military reinforcements arrived and saw the situation, they joined with the demonstrators, passing out their weapons and participating in the storming of the radio transmitter. An entire tank regiment that had been given the order to violently break up the demonstration refused to intervene and fraternized with the crowd.

By midnight more and more trucks full of workers from the factories in the industrial districts of Csepel and Ujest were arriving. They brought munitions and weapons from the factory depots. Other workers went to the army barracks and arsenals to fetch more weapons. These were, in many cases, given to them freely by the soldiers.

The government called on Soviet troops and tank units for help in defeating the uprising. The battles continued throughout the night. In the early morning hours of October 24, Soviet tanks rolled through the streets of the capital. Spontaneously throughout the working class districts combat units were formed and barricades erected. Militant communist workers often stood at their head.

The largest and most important combat unit was at the Corvin Alley, immediately opposite the Kilian Barracks. Fighting broke out there when officers from the barracks attempted to arrest some of the demonstrators. The Ministry of Defense sent Colonel Pál Maléter with five tanks to free the barracks from the siege. He released the prisoners and negotiated a cease-fire. Maléter then tried to pursue a policy of neutrality. However, when Soviet tanks threatened, he defended the barracks and the surrounding area until a cease-fire was announced.

Maléter, who was 39 at the time, had fought as a partisan in Transylvania against the Nazis. He had joined the Communist Party in 1945 and was entrusted with the reorganization of the Hungarian military. During the entire revolution, he wore the red star of the partisans and always stressed that he was nothing other than a communist. In an interview with Western journalists, he said: "If we get rid of the Russians, don't think we will be going back to the old times. And if some people want to do this, then we shall see what we do with them!" He stroked his revolver and added, "We don't want to go back to capitalism. We want socialism in Hungary."

Maléter was made defense minister in the short-lived Nagy government. During negotiations with representatives of the Red Army under the leadership of KGB chief Serov, he was arrested. He was later executed along with Nagy.

After four days of bitter fighting, the Moscow bureaucracy agreed to a cease-fire and promised to withdraw its troops. The decision was made not so much because of the unexpectedly determined resistance of the Hungarians, but out of fear that Red Army soldiers, infected by the spirit of the revolution, would join the uprising and impart the mood of rebellion to the Soviet working class.

Wherever Russian tank columns arrived, workers and students encircled them and sought to explain that they had a right to defend themselves against the Stalinist bureaucracy. In some cases, tank commanders made speeches explaining they had been told they would be fighting fascists in Hungary, but now saw that only workers were on the streets.

The rebels distributed leaflets in Russian to the soldiers. One of these said: "Friends, do not shoot us! Refuse to play the role of executioner! You helped us overthrow the fascist dictatorship, but now you yourselves are helping a dictatorship. Friends, you are serving red imperialism and by no means the cause of socialism!"

The scenes of fraternization, in which Hungarian workers and students clambered onto Soviet tanks and draped them in Hungarian flags, led many people in Budapest to believe that the Red Army had joined the revolution. The mere thought of such a development made the blood of the Kremlin bureaucrats run cold.

At one point, a crowd marching to the parliament building and shouting, "We are workers, not fascists," was hit with machine-gun fire from a roof top. Neither the demonstrators nor the Soviet soldiers in the square knew who had fired. Soviet tanks shot back at the roof, but by this time almost 100 demonstrators lay dead in the square.

It was assumed that the hated AVH was responsible for the massacre. But Western radio stations, above all, the American propaganda station Radio Liberty, repeatedly broadcast that the Red Army was responsible for the mass killing. This incident became the trigger for further violent battles which continued until October 28.

To be continued.



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Red Army soldiers fraternize