

Hungary: The controversy over the heritage of the 1956 Revolution

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In his famous essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Karl Marx describes how men, when entering an uncertain future, seek to costume themselves in the time-honoured trappings of the past. When they are occupied with revolutionizing things and creating a more progressive society, they conjure up the spirits of past heroes. When social development moves into reverse, when society regresses, conjuring up the past degenerates into farce.

What took place in Hungary last week on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the workers' uprising of 1956 can only be described as the parody of a farce. The quarrelling wings of the new ruling clique fought over the mantle of the 1956 insurgents, tearing it to shreds in the process.

The conflicts surrounding the official ceremonies—the mutual insults, police interventions and street battles—are an expression of deep divisions within Hungarian society which urgently demand a progressive solution. The lack of historical understanding, so evident on the day of the commemoration, is itself a major obstacle to such a solution.

The official ceremonies were organised by the Socialist-Liberal coalition government led by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany. Gyurcsany is a member of the Socialist Party (MSZP)—the successor organization to the Stalinist Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP), whose grip on power was maintained by the bloody suppression, by means of Soviet tanks and troops, of the 1956 workers' uprising.

Gyurcsany had invited twenty European heads of state to the commemoration celebrations in Kossuth Square, which faces the Hungarian parliament. The night before, the square had been cleared by police of protesters hostile to the government, organized and led by right-wing forces.

Other leading Western powers, including the European Union and NATO, also sent high-ranking representatives to the ceremony. They celebrated the 1956 revolution as a struggle for freedom and democracy whose aims had now been realised through the introduction of a bourgeois constitution, a “free-market” economy and the restoration of private property.

This is a complete distortion of the real goals of the uprising. Those involved in 1956, the majority of whom were ordinary workers from the factories, were not seeking to establish a capitalist regime in Hungary. In the course of its history, the Hungarian bourgeoisie had never developed democratic forms of rule. Following the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, the Hungarian bourgeoisie took power in 1920 by bloodily

suppressing the Soviet republic which had been established one year previously. It then held onto power through authoritarian forms of rule for a period of 25 years, initially under the dictatorship of Miklos Horthy and then in close collaboration with the German Nazis.

The goal of the 1956 uprising against the Stalinist dictatorship was to establish a workers' democracy. The emergence of workers' councils and the significant role they then played in the uprising made absolutely clear that for the workers involved the aim was democratic control of all spheres of society, including the economy—not the return of the factories to their former bourgeois owners.

It was not the revolution, but rather its bloody suppression that was decisive in opening the road to the re-introduction of capitalism—a process that was completed four decades later. The initiative for such a development did not come from the oppositional workers of 1956, but from the Stalinist bureaucracy itself, which, under conditions of intensified political crisis, could defend its privileged position only through the introduction of new, capitalist-type forms of ownership.

The career of the 45-year-old Ferenc Gyurcsany is exemplary in this respect. He began as a high-ranking functionary in the Stalinist youth movement, made millions in the course of the privatisations carried out in the 1990s, and as prime minister is now carrying out a program of drastic cuts along lines dictated by the European Union and the international banks. He nevertheless continues to describe himself as a “socialist.”

It comes therefore as no surprise that European government leaders were quite ready to recognise Gyurcsany's claim to the heritage of 1956 and were prepared to attend in such large numbers.

The ceremonies were boycotted by the Hungarian opposition, led by the nationalist conservative party Fidesz (the Hungarian Civic Union). Fidesz has made its own claim to the heritage of 1956, which it seeks to depict as an anti-communist and nationalist movement. In so doing, the party merely repeats the lies given out by the Stalinists in 1956. The Soviet bureaucracy and its minions in Eastern Europe and the Communist Party leaderships around the world condemned the uprising at the time as the work of right-wingers and fascists, in order to justify the brutal suppression of the movement.

Fidesz's roots go back to the Alliance of Young Democrats, formed by a group of young intellectuals in 1988, at the end of the

Stalinist era. They raised the demand for free elections. Today, Hungary's biggest opposition party represents, above all, rural and middle-class layers that opposed Stalinism because it prevented them from obtaining the same level of power and wealth enjoyed by their counterparts in the West. They regard the former Stalinist functionaries who have become multi-millionaires with envy and jealousy. This is a major source of their bitter hatred for Gyurcsany and the MSZP.

Fidesz represents an ideological concoction that combines anti-communism, nationalism and the glorification of private property with social demagoguery that demonizes the European Union and international capital. The leader of Fidesz, Viktor Orban, is a talented demagogue and something of a virtuoso when it comes to manipulating this contradictory keyboard.

Although officially affiliated to the European People's Party, the European alliance of Christian and conservative parties, Fidesz works closely with extreme right-wing forces. These have been prominent at many Fidesz demonstrations, employing fascist symbols and shouting anti-Semitic slogans.

In terms of programmatic content, there is little to choose between Fidesz and the MSZP. As head of government between 1998 and 2002, Orban continued the austerity policies of his predecessors and prepared for the country's entry into the European Union. Under his leadership, Hungary also joined NATO.

The main field of activity for Orban's government, however, consisted of distributing lucrative posts to his own supporters. His regime adopted increasingly authoritarian measures and eventually collapsed in a web of corruption scandals.

Since September, Orban has been seeking to revenge his defeat at the polls in 2002. The publication of an internal speech by Gyurcsany, in which he pledged his party to strict austerity policies and admitted to having deceived the voters "morning, noon and night," unleashed a wave of indignation, which Fidesz has been striving to maintain ever since—with the support of the extreme right.

Following demonstrations in September involving violent clashes, Fidesz organized around-the-clock protests in front of parliament, demanding the resignation of the government. According to the plans of Fidesz, the anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution was to constitute a high point in these protests.

The government reacted by forcibly clearing the square in front of the parliament building and moving with great force against protests in the city centre. According to police statistics, some 130 persons were injured, including ten policemen. The right-wing demonstrators sought to pose in the tradition of the rebellious workers of 1956, and even stole an old Soviet tank from a museum, which they paraded on the streets for the benefit of the assembled international media.

According to the Hungarian press agency MTI, a crowd of 100,000 turned out for a demonstration called by Fidesz to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the revolution.

So far, Gyurcsany has resisted all demands for his resignation as head of government. He knows he has the backing of Western governments and business interests, which currently place more trust in the millionaire businessman Gyurcsany than in the

unscrupulous demagogue Orban. Any replacement of the head of government at this point would shake the confidence of investors, argued the head of the Socialist parliamentary fraction, Ildiko Lendvai. The "free market" liberal coalition partner of the MSZP has also expressed its full confidence in Gyurcsany.

Orban is determined, however, to continue his campaign to destabilize the government. His next move is to carry through a constitutionally questionable referendum on the government's reform course. He is seeking thereby to exploit widespread anger over the socially devastating austerity program pursued by Gyurcsany. Fidesz was able to register clear gains in regional elections held October 1, winning a majority in eighteen of Hungary's nineteen regions.

Fidesz and its extreme-right supporters are able to exercise such influence only because of the lack of any genuine socialist alternative to the MSZP. The decades-long suppression of the working class by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the cynicism with which the self-appointed "lefts" of the MSZP defend the interests of international capital have created a political vacuum in which the right-wing demagogues of Fidesz can flourish.

It is the task of the Hungarian working class to defend the heritage of the 1956 revolution against the presumptuous claims of both the MSZP and Fidesz. The uprising in 1956 was a workers' rebellion against Stalinist oppression, not a nationalist movement for the restoration of capitalism. As such, it was a source of inspiration for workers all over world. Many members of Communist parties who retained socialist ideals broke with Stalinism and turned to the Trotskyist movement on the basis of the lessons drawn by the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, from the savage repression of the uprising.

Over many decades, both Stalinism the bourgeoisie have worked to cut off the working class from its own history—the history of the Hungarian Revolution and the earlier traditions of the socialist and communist movement. An entire generation of socialist revolutionaries was wiped out in the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, including virtually all of the outstanding leaders of the Russian Revolution and numerous Hungarian communists. The leading figure in the Left Opposition to Stalinism and founder of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky, was declared a non-person and murdered by a Stalinist assassin in 1940.

The assimilation of this history is an urgent necessity today. Only the perspective defended by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International—the international unification of the working class in the struggle for a socialist society—offers an alternative to the social misery and political reaction that has resulted from capitalist restoration in Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe.



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