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THE '56 HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION AND SOVIET
PUBLIC OPINION

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The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet Bloc Countries: Reactions and Repercussions

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THE '56 HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION AND SOVIET PUBLIC OPINION

New sources

Speaking of the response in the Soviet Union to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, it is necessary first of all to consider the enormous pressure of the propaganda machine and the shortage of reliable information in the Soviet Union about the events in Hungary. Suffice it to say that such an important pre-revolution event as the October 6 reburial of László Rajk was ignored in the Soviet press. The Soviet papers on the morning of October 24 likewise made no mention of the events in Hungary the day before, the first day of the revolution. It may be assumed that the propaganda staff of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) were proceeding from the false assumption that the revolt in Budapest would be suppressed in a few hours and it would be better to postpone until then any mention to the Soviet public of what was gauged by the Kremlin as a “counterrevolutionary putsch”. On October 25, *Pravda* published a short TASS report, meaningfully headed “Collapse of anti-popular adventure in Hungary”.¹ The central papers published several reports under similar headings in the next few days, giving a false impression of how the events in Hungary were progressing. Even the Hungarian communist paper *Szabad Nép* took issue with *Pravda* on this.² The situation in Hungary at the end of October

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1 Proval antinarodnoy avanturi v Vengrii, *Pravda* October 25, 1956.

2 Híven az igazsághoz, *Szabad Nép* October 28, 1956. On October 30, the *Szabad Nép* correspondent in Moscow, Gyula Kékesdi, and the Embassy first secretary, László Rosta, visited the offices of *Pravda* and presented the relevant issue of *Szabad Nép*, proposing that *Pravda* publish a short note acknowledging it had wrongly appraised the events in Hungary for want of reliable information from Budapest. They considered this important as the opinion of *Pravda* was seen by many Hungarians as that “of all the Soviet people”. The *Pravda* editor-in-chief, P. Satukov, reported that day to CPSU Secretary P. Pospelov that *Pravda* did not consider it expedient to enter into polemics with the Hungarian paper. Orehova–Sereda–Stykalin 1998, 453–4.

did not change the official Soviet assessment of the nature of the events, but it forced the Soviet leaders to discard their optimism that the “counterrevolution” had already been suppressed. At the beginning of November, a party resolution was adopted calling for intensification of the propaganda connected with the Hungarian events. By November 3, the Soviet press was filled with slanted articles about “counterrevolutionary outrages”, designed to shape Soviet public opinion. Soviet leaders had no doubt the propaganda campaign was effective and the public taking the official version on trust. For instance, Mikhail Suslov, a member of the CPSU Presidium, told a meeting of party officials in Moscow on November 6 to mark the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, that the whole Soviet people rejoiced at the victory of the Hungarian working people over the counterrevolution.³ The flow of misinformation did influence public opinion to a large extent, but Suslov and his comrades suffered from wishful thinking. The various sources (inter-party correspondence, KGB reports, diaries, memoirs) show a mixed Soviet public response to the Hungarian events.

It cannot be denied that the official propaganda allegations were given some credence by most Soviet citizens. World War II was fresh in the minds even of younger generations, and the most effective, persuasive propaganda strokes were those that recalled the war. According to the press, the Soviet involvement in Hungary had prevented a new world war. This argument employed so frequently in Soviet propaganda was also used by Khrushchev when talking to Western politicians and journalists.⁴ Soviet citizens who believed official dogma saw the events primarily as a Western attempt to detach Hungary from the Soviet sphere of influence: “Why would the Soviet Union give Hungary to the Americans? After all, a lot of Soviet soldiers were killed liberating the country from the Germans.”⁵ Soviet policy in Hungary was assessed by many as a natural reaction to an attempt to revise the results of World War II. Those who had liked the Stalinist regime supported the military action but criticized Soviet policy after Stalin’s death, especially the rapprochement with Tito’s Yugoslavia and the revelations of the 20th Congress of the CPSU. The antecedents of the Hungarian events were seen in Khrushchev’s revision of Stalinist foreign policy.

3 *Pravda* November 7, 1956.

4 E. g. at a meeting with a correspondent of *Il Messaggero* on January 5, 1957. See: The Russian State Archives of Modern History (Rossiisky Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Noveishey Istorii, hereafter RGANI), f. 5. op. 30. d. 225. l. 73. Earlier, at the CPSU Presidium session on October 31, where the decision had been made to overthrow the Imre Nagy government, Khrushchev noted there would be no big war (“bolshoy voini ne budhet”). Orehova–Sereda–Stykalin 1998, 480. He took account of the US policy of non-interference in affairs in the Soviet sphere of influence.

5 For analysis of Soviet public opinion on events in Hungary, see Aksutin 2004, 186–98.

According to the record of the October 31 session of the CPSU Presidium, the existence of such an attitude to the Hungarian events was for Khrushchev an important argument for resolving the Hungarian situation by force.⁶ Many ordinary party members intensely disliked any sign of weakening of the Soviet Union as a superpower, and the Hungarian events were taken as such a sign. They thought that only the power of the Soviet army and the firmness of the Soviet position in East-Central Europe stood in the way of a new world war.

However, there was another kind of disagreement over the Kremlin's policy. The propaganda did not persuade everybody and doubts about the effectiveness of a military solution were expressed in many quarters. These sources record statements by ordinary Soviet citizens saying that the Soviet Union should not force its will on other countries or meddle in their internal affairs, but leave other peoples to resolve their own problems. Others said the Hungarian question should be resolved by peaceful means to prevent innocent victims on both sides.⁷ Some sources reveal ambivalence in Soviet contemporaries, including youth, towards the Hungarian events and Moscow's policy towards them. For example, such reactions by Moscow teenagers have been recorded by the well-known historian and literary critic Igor Volgin, only 15 years old at the time: "There was sincere sympathy for the Hungarian insurgents, we desired their victory; we had no information about the Hungarian events except official statements, but we instinctively felt: Soviet tanks in Budapest—is evil; there is enormous falsehood in all this." On the other hand, he continues, they did not want the Soviet bloc to collapse.⁸ Awareness of their own helplessness was typical of intellectuals of various generations. The well-known philosopher and orientalist Grigory Pomerants remembers he and his friends were very ashamed of Soviet policy in Hungary but their helplessness predominated over their shame and their feelings of protest degenerated into a tinkling of glasses.⁹

Disagreement with Soviet policy on Hungary did not always lead to protest action, but historians are aware of several cases where it did. A teenager in the city of Yaroslavl, the son of a senior manager in industry, raised a self-made poster in the streets on November 7, calling for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary.¹⁰ Leaflets were distributed widely in Moscow, Leningrad and many other places, espe-

6 As he put it, "Our party would not understand us." ("nas ne poimet nasha partiya"). See Orehova-Sereda-Stykalin 1998, 479.

7 Aksutin 2004, 186–98.

8 Polikovskaya 1997, 37–8.

9 Pomerants 1990, 143–4.

10 See the KGB report RGANI, f. 5. op. 30. d. 141. l. 67–8.

cially by students.¹¹ In Moscow and Leningrad, there were illegal groups of students who met to discuss the Hungarian Revolution and sharply criticized Soviet policy. Criticisms of the Soviet government were expressed even at legal student meetings, where some saw the actions of young Hungarians as a model to follow. At one legal student meeting in Moscow, participants shouted that there was a revolution going on in Hungary and that the Soviet Union needed the same kind.¹² The criticism of the Soviet government did not necessarily mean anti-socialist thinking. Many students who subscribed to the socialist idea emphasized the variety of socialism models and displayed interest in the Yugoslav model, as well as the Hungarian workers' councils.¹³

Soviet workers also paid attention to the Hungarian events and were influenced by the Hungarian example, which prompted them to protest. In some factories in various parts of the Soviet Union, workers demanded pay rises and improved living conditions. There were calls for strike action in some industrial regions. Some radical protest actions resulted in monuments to Stalin being destroyed. National anti-Soviet movements intensified activities in various parts of the Soviet Union, notably Lithuania¹⁴ and Trans-carpathian Ukraine, with its large Hungarian minority.¹⁵

KGB agents recorded several critical statements by famous intellectuals. The world-famous physicist and future Nobel laureate Lev Landau told friends and colleagues the Hungarian Revolution was an encouraging event and the heroism of the young Hungarians fighting for freedom deserved admiration, while the action of the Soviet leaders was a crime resulting in bloodshed. He was also very critical of Kádár, whom he considered a Soviet puppet. Landau recalled the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and called the young people of '56 the real descendants of the great revolutionaries

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- 11 For the text of one, see RGANI, f. 5. op. 30. d. 141. l. 14–5. See also the memoirs of some who distributed leaflets and were arrested and convicted to years in prison: B. Pustintsev: *Piat let za "nashu i vashu svobodu"*, *Obshchaya gazeta* 1996. 31. oktiabr–5. noiabr.; Anohin 1996.
- 12 See Pizhikov 2003, 78–9 and see also Burtin–Lyubarsky 1997. As early as November 4, the CPSU Presidium was discussing the situation in schools and universities and “hostile attitudes” among students. It was decided to act against those who spread opposing views. See Fursenko 2003, 202.
- 13 A typical example was the L. Krasnopevchev group in the History Department of Moscow University. “Dhelo” *molodhih istorikov*...
- 14 On Friday, November 2, a Catholic holiday, thousands of people marched through the streets of Vilnius and Kaunas, the main cities of Lithuania, and the authorities feared they could get out of control. See Alekseeva 1992, 41.
- 15 Dupka–Horváth 1993; Dupka 2006.

of the past.¹⁶ Professor A. Lyubishchev from Leningrad also drew a parallel to the revolution of 1848. As he wrote in his diary, Emperor Francis Joseph in 1849 had legal grounds for ruling Hungary, but Kádár had no grounds at all.¹⁷ Professor S. Dmitriev, a historian from Moscow University, predicted in his diary on November 3, the day before the Soviet aggression in Hungary, that there would be a new bloody intervention similar to that of 1849.¹⁸ November 4 he named Black Sunday and wrote that he was ashamed that Russian people were not protesting against the evil deeds, and behaved like a nation of slaves. According to Dmitriev, the struggle for national liberation in Hungary had gained victory, the whole political system had collapsed, and new structures had been established. Only by force of arms could the Soviet Union restore order, but after such action it would be impossible to speak of real unity in the socialist bloc. The Hungarian events prompted Dmitriev to think of the deeply anti-democratic nature of the Soviet political system, despite Lenin and all his declarations of socialist democracy and collective leadership, or Khrushchev and his subjective desire to improve the Soviet system. The 20th Congress, Dmitriev opined, had brought no change but in superficial political forms and methods. Khrushchev and his team were concentrating on criticism of the past and trying to stop attempts to criticize the present regime and find the roots of the so-called cult of personality in the Soviet political system. According to Dmitriev and Landau, real democratization was impossible without a multi-party system and real freedom of press. Otherwise the vacuum left by Stalin's death would simply be filled by somebody else.

Soviet policy in Hungary was criticized not only by the conservative Dmitriev and the liberal Landau, but by some intellectuals loyal to the socialist idea. Lyubishchev, mentioned earlier, quarrelled with the concept of counterrevolution, writing in his diary that a progressive movement had taken place in Budapest, progressive despite the presence of a lot of hooligans on the streets of Budapest. The Stalinist "partocracy" was the ruling elite in the Soviet Union, and overthrowing it was a progressive task, even if private business would take the initiative in Hungary for some time. In Hungary and everywhere else, the people, as Lyubishchev put it, preferred to deal with capitalists rather than Stalinists, because businessmen paid in money and property if they made mistakes, but party bureaucrats felt no responsibility for their deeds. Both Dmitriev and Lyubishchev noted in their diaries that tanks and special courts could not be effective arguments for the communist idea. Lyubishchev saw the Hungarian

16 Ilizarov 1999, 151–61.

17 Lyubishchev 1991, 41.

18 *Iz dnevnikov S. S. Dmitrieva*, 149.

events as internationally significant because the strongest blow had been struck against Stalinism not by capitalists, but by workers and progressive youth.

It was being rumoured in Moscow in early November 1956 that the unrest would spread from Hungary to neighbouring countries, above all Czechoslovakia. Landau saw such prospective developments as positive signs: the Hungarian experience was worth borrowing and the revolution in Hungary had opened the possibility of revolutions in other countries of the Soviet bloc, including the centre of world communism, the Soviet Union. Lyubishchev also wrote that nobody, before the Hungarian events, had taken seriously the possibility of active resistance to Soviet power in East-Central Europe; the Hungarians had shown that the resistance could occur. The KGB reports show that many Soviet people under the influence of the Hungarian events were thinking of the possibility of revolution in the Soviet Union as well. An old Bolshevik in the town of Vladimir, for instance, who was invited to the Komsomol conference, noted that a revolt of the workers had taken place in Hungary and this possibility could not be excluded in the Soviet Union either, because the standard of life was low.¹⁹ Others assessed the prospects for the Soviet system more realistically. Dmitriev wrote that spontaneous manifestations of mass indignation could not endanger powerful party and state mechanisms, including propaganda. It must be added that the possible unrest of workers was received by many people with anxiety, as the beginning of civil war, for older generations still remembered the civil war of 1918–20. The lack of objective information on the situation in Hungary only increased the fears that a turn to sharp confrontation was also possible in the Soviet Union.

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The consolidation of the new power in Hungary was supported by the Soviet Stalinists and gave them the added self-confidence to try to take the political initiative. The party meetings in Moscow University at the end of 1956 reminded Dmitriev of the Stalinist years. At a Central Committee meeting in December 1956, Khrushchev expounded his concept of domestic policy after the Hungarian events. He was sure many communists had mistaken the ideas of the 20th Congress and socialist democracy, and had ceased to struggle against enemies of socialism who should be persecuted and arrested.²⁰ He repeated this in May 1957 at a meeting with writers and artists, adding that the campaign of criticism of the cult of personality had lost its topicality.²¹ One participant, the writer Venyamin Kaverin, noted in his memoirs that he and his colleagues had expected arrests among writers, all the more

19 Aksutin 2004, 193.

20 See RGANI, f. 2. op. 1. d. 197. l. 114–5.

21 Vistuplenie N. S. Khrushcheva..., 77–88.

as Khrushchev said the Hungarian events could have been prevented if two or three demagogues had been arrested in time.²² It must be said that Khrushchev stood by what he said: the number arrested and sentenced on political grounds in 1957 was greater than in the previous year.²³ There were also some groups of dissident students and young intellectuals: a group round L. Krasnopevchev in Moscow, another around R. Pimenov in Leningrad, and some others. These young people interpreted the Hungarian events differently from the official point of view. Those arrested for expressing sympathy for the Hungarian revolt were sentenced to several years in prison—usually three to seven, but in rare cases ten.

Soviet intellectuals responded also to the Imre Nagy trial in June 1958. Dmitriev noted in his diary that the methods of eliminating political opponents used by Stalin had not passed away; they could still be used by successors who had sharply criticized Stalin at the 20th Congress. The prosecutions of so-called communist revisionists could not be effective, he said, because the alternative ideas had not been refuted and the methods used against them showed only weakness of power.

To sum up, not everybody in the Soviet Union took on trust the imposed stereotype of the Hungarian events, despite the propaganda efforts. Various views were held, including sharp criticism of Soviet policy, even if not everybody dared to protest in public.

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22 Chuprinin 1989, 375.

23 The numbers sentenced on political grounds were 623 in 1956, 2498 in 1957, and 1545 in 1958. Cf. Petrov 1997 and Kozlov–Mironenko 1999.

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