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Consequences of 1956: short-run, long-run, remembrance

My paper is divided into three main sections and a short appendix. The one deals with the direct, short-term the consequences of the 1956 Hungarian revolution: emigration and domestic as well as Eastern European repressive campaigns. The second part is looking for answers to the question, what was the role of the 1956 in the internal history of the Soviet-type system, especially in the process what János Kornai called "a shift from classical system [version]". In the third part three remarks will be proposed on the remembrance of the revolution.

1. Short-term consequences

a. The wave of emigration after the Hungarian Revolution culminated at the end of November, early December 1956. A total of almost two hundred thousand people left the country - mostly younger and more educated than the average of the Hungarians. It was the biggest exodus in Europe since the forced population movements right after the Second World War. And that was the biggest a crowd crossed the Iron Curtain until then – except the special case of the German Democratic Republic. Most Hungarian refugees – after staying in camps in Austria and Yugoslavia for a while – settled in North America and Western Europe. They were received with special care and a high degree of helpfulness which was a clear sign of sympathy and solidarity of host societies and governments. Even countries with a quite ungenerous immigration policies earlier, like Canada and Switzerland opened their borders. The returnees did not reach the proportion of 10%. Hungarian refugees were not only witnesses of a revolution. They delivered first-hand information on conditions and everyday life in the Soviet-type systems – an opportunity that both Western intelligence and research centers of Soviet studies tried to take. Large-scale research projects were organized, of which the most famous was Columbia University Research Project Hungary (CURPH) led by Paul Lazarsfeld. Interestingly enough the full-scale processing of gathered data still has not been taken place. Similar research was conducted with psychological depth interviews at Rutgers University etc.

The vast majority of Hungary's population had very limited amount of knowledge on the other side of the Iron Courtain. So that the image of the West was distorted, fragmented. That isolation could not be sustained after the wave of emigration. Masses of people—relatives, friends, acquaintances—were receiving regular information from the “other side” on daily life there.

Due to the special Hungarian travel politics from the early 1960s onwards those information could be based on personal experiences. Both were usually told of successful adaptation. One thing was certain: thereafter, the socialist system in Hungary had little opportunity to claim it surpassed its adversary.

b. Reprisal process in Hungary after the revolution was the last of mass political oppression campaigns in Eastern Europe. Unlike the purges conducted in the late 1930s in Moscow (and the show trials in 1948-52 in Eastern Europe), the post-1956 campaign can be characterised as 'show trials behind closed doors'. (The Imre Nagy trial was no exception either.) Investigations with suspicion of political "crimes" were conducted in cases of at least 35 thousand people until the end of 1959. Among them 26 thousand were prosecuted, 80 % of those were condemned and imprisoned. About 13 thousand people were brought to re-established internment camps for a been shorter or longer period. Overall, more than a hundred thousand people, together with family members were concerned by different forms of repression. Between December 1956 and the summer of 1961 225 people were executed because of their participation in the Revolution.

Contrary to the indiscriminate terror of Rakosi regime, the post-1956 reprisals had three relatively well determined particular targets. **The first one consisted of those who participated in armed combat**, or stood in connection with rebel troops. They were usually 18-25 years of age, or even younger, mostly unskilled urban workers, apprentices and conscripts. The judgments passed on them were not so numerous, but most of them were sentenced by the martial law or by special 'People's Courts'. They received the harshest prison sentences, and a large part of them were sentenced to death. Presumably a great part of the armed fighters emigrated; so the retaliation hit the most determined – and the most *naive* who stayed at or returned home. **The second and largest group was of factory workers' council and local revolutionary committee members.** Most of them were 28-35 year old skilled workers, foremen, smallholder peasants, a couple of intellectuals (teachers e. g.) who had a kind of genuine authority within their locality or workplace. Their trials were going in ordinary courts, and received more lenient sentences. As they created the revolution's self-organized local elite, they were also supposed to have a moral potential and political engagement to act as leaders and activists of any further (future) democratic movement. **A third, smaller "target" group was of the pre-revolutionary party-intellectuals.** But only those members of the opposition were punished who identified themselves with the objectives of the revolution and participated in the post-November 4 resistance. Concerning the first group

the repressive machinery sought to identify and punish everyone. For the two others (especially the third) a certain "selection" prevailed which was usually not done on principle.

Mass retaliation occurred when there were practically no sign of resistance in the country. Processes tried to set the participation in the Revolution as deliberate, pre-organized action to overthrow the communist system and restore the prewar (as they called, the Horthyite) regime. A variety of non-political crimes (theft, robbery, murder) were sought to impose against the defendants. In such cases authorities usually distorted the facts, and in many cases such charges had no factual base at all. There were also processes which had the only aim to approve a clearly political thesis of organized counter-revolution. The Imre Nagy trial was an archetype of that.

The reprisal after 1956 is an international story. Repression hit all the expressions of solidarity throughout the Soviet bloc. In the GDR and the Soviet Union (mainly in Transcarpathia) close to a hundred people were prosecuted each; almost seven hundred in Czechoslovakia. In Romania, however, proceedings were going against nearly ten thousand people, and dozens were sentenced to death. Only 10-15% of imprisoned belonged to Hungarian minority. Not only leaders but societies (at least their most active, most well-informed part) of the Soviet-type countries were aware that 1956 was indeed a common story. The Hungarian Revolution did not merely promise Hungary a way of breaking out of the Stalinist empire. Those who suffered repression after 1956 whether in Temesvár (Timișoara) or East Berlin or the villages of Transcarpathia, were likewise victims of the Hungarian Revolution. And the people who fought in Budapest in those days were struggling for the freedom of the whole region under the Soviet system.

2. Long-term consequences

a. As regards the political effects of the Revolution in Hungary, 1956 was a new challenge for the ruling elite and the population it ruled as well. It was a challenge for the Soviet „Hungary-policy”, and not only in the short term. Moscow’s considerations after 1956 clearly manifested that the lessons of the Hungarian events had been understood. The famous Declaration on relations between Socialist Countries, October 30 was never withdrawn. Principles and institutions of the Soviet determination largely remained, but the practice had changed. Moscow tried to avoid another ’56-type crisis (increasing tensions, particular conflicts, then the total collapse) as much as Janos Kadar and other East-European leaders did. After 1956, the Soviet security zone could not be based on military strength exclusively. More important was a circle of leaders who were loyal, but also knew and understood local circumstances, local interests and were also ready to represent the latter to a certain degree at

least. Janos Kadar met this requirement perfectly, and became veritable archetype of the post-Stalin Soviet leadership's ideal partner. He was able to combine total loyalty with initiative, slavish surrender with a degree of personal autonomy for a long time so that successfully establishing what Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller called '*Khrushchevite model state*.' Immediately after the pacification of Hungary the most visible institutions of Soviet influence and control were certainly degraded. With the exception of the area of state security and the army all the advisors were called back. A 'regular' interstate agreement was signed on occupation troops. The Soviet Union hardly had more offensive goals concerning Hungary, they were rather set up for keeping what they had already.

Terrifying memories of the strength of the suppressed society, the 1956 Great Fear stayed with the decision-makers. Similarly, the bitterness of defeat, the requirements of "realism" with the active part of the Hungarian society. Likewise the sense of (self-)justification with the passers-by and the outsiders (because there were such groups even in those days, too...): they knew there was no chance from the beginning... *Kádárisim* was a special post-Stalinist Hungarian style of exercising power, a common sense within the society, an interaction between 'us' and 'them', a world view - and all were formed as a result of 1956. 1956 is a mile-stone in Hungary's history not because of its success, but because of its effects. I cannot provide here with a detailed description of post-fifty-six period, but its orientation point was undoubtedly 1956.

b. *In 1956, freedom throughout the whole region of Eastern Europe was not realized.* The Hungarian Revolution's defeat made it obvious that the status quo established in 1945 had frozen both militarily and politically. While 1956 somewhat heightened tensions between the world's super powers, the crisis in Suez also proved that the United States and the Soviet Union could reach agreement in world politics. The orientation of regions being released from the yoke of colonialism naturally raised the stakes once again, creating a new arena for the Cold War. 1956 did not halt the *détente*. On the contrary, it understandably gave it new momentum: Soviet leaders were relieved to be given proof that the United States would not question its authority over regions acquired during the Second World War.

Democratic movements of 1956 in Hungary and Eastern Europe influenced the whole inner world of the Soviet system. But the shift from the classic Stalinism began partly earlier after the end of the Second World War and mainly by Stalin's death. It was a slow, long process. The role of direct coercion as a social technology of organization started to decrease as well as the intensity of the forced social movements. Hitherto dominant role of ideology was becoming less manifest. Hitherto rapidly and unpredictably changing system stabilized, turned to a phase of bureaucratic normalization. Utopian goals (such as building socialism and even communism)

had been replaced by the current tasks of modernization. Following the acquisition of power the cadre elite required rather to maintain it. Among other factors 1956 made the leaders of the Soviet-type countries be aware of importance of consumption and raising the standard of living which could provide an opportunity to avoid internal crises.

c. The Soviet Union's prestige was quite high throughout the world before and after the Second World War. It had many believers in Western Europe and North America among left-wing intellectuals. 1945 and the liberation, bloody sacrifices of the Soviet people even could increase this attraction. 1956 significantly damaged this picture. Liberal, conservative, and even socialist critics rightly pointed out that the Soviet Union ignored the will of the Hungarian people and acted like an imperialist aggressor. Support and popularity of the Western communist movements declined. A debate was begun within the circles of Communist fellow-travelers and left-wing intelligentsia whether Marxist concept of socialism was compatible with the Soviet practice. The lesson of the Hungarian revolution, however, is only one important initial station on this path. The Czechoslovak communist reform program in 1968, the left-wing student movements in Western Europe and America revealed that criticism of the overbureaucratized imperialist Soviet Union suited well to surviving Marxist visions. Even some certain *phenomena* of the Hungarian Revolution, such as workers' councils, or the role of reform-communist intellectuals, the personality of Communist reformer Imre Nagy, could be interpreted well in the prospective of those hopes of late sixties.

d. 1956 was also a challenge for the that time notion of Europe. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in his famous address before the Dallas Council on World Affairs, October 27, 1956 was talking about 'a new and friendly and no longer divided Europe', which – in a hopefully near future – was to unify both of America's Western allies and those countries the US did not look upon even 'as potential military allies.' Then the fall of the Hungarian Revolution made this wishful interpretation of Europe forgotten. Integration of the western half accelerated, the eastern half left outside. A good decade and a half was necessary even for that some politicians from the East – including Janos Kadar – began to speak on the affinity of the two halves and the opportunity of fruitful relations between them. Substantive changes have taken place only since 1989 when the whole Soviet system collapsed. But the Hungarian revolution did not become a model for the democratic changes, neither in destroy of the old nor in creating a new. This was clearly demonstrated both in 1968 Prague, and in the Polish revolution of *Solidarnosc* in 1980-81 already. So it happened in 1989, too. In this respect and also taking into account that no similar event took place during those three decades after 1956 the Hungarian Revolution seems to be much rather a deterrent example than a model.

e. By the the greatest master of German conceptual history, Reinhart Koselleck *historical event* is a sequence of elementary events, interpreted by both the contemporaries and later analysts as substantial (fundamental) enough. Historical event causes/triggers a decisive, long-term transformation of the existing structures. This conviction usually need time to be formed. It is far from certain that the judgment of posterity coincides with the opinion of the contemporaries. After 1989, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution definitely was considered by the new historiography as a historical event as (1) the revolution shook the Soviet empire, hitherto thought to be immovable; (2) it burst the political, even philosophical dogma of Soviet socialism (3) Hungary provided a model for a revolutionary popular movement that would end totalitarianism. This was (and still is) a typically teleological explanation: 1956, by this position, led straight to 1989-91. The Hungarian revolution was at least an *overture* of a long process. Others point out, me included, that 1956 did not change the structures of the Soviet-type system fundamentally. Due to the shift mentioned above the totalitarian system was transformed gradually into a post-totalitarian or authoritarian rule. But only the totalitarian intents disappeared, the totalitarian institutions and potentials remain unchanged. Truly, the *modus operandi*, the praxis, its style became different. But changes of 1989 can not be simply derived from a mid-fifties event. I think that '56, however, not changing the structure itself, fundamentally changed the *experience* of it. It changed the mental framework of the dictatorship as a psychological state. It was manifested in individual and collective strategies of way of life. One key factor of it that society thinks a system to be permanent or temporal. 1956 in Hungary brought a change: due to the failure great part of the society came to the conclusion that one must live together (or cooperate, or seek for some symbiotic relationship) with a version of the Soviet-type system. Hungary itself saw the world differently after '56 than it had before: *more realistically*. On the one hand, '56 ended the hope, the mood of awaiting a miracle, beginning with the expectation that the Hungarians had only to rise up for the democratic West to free the country, or at least give it effective support. Experiencing 1956, however was a paradox itself: on the one hand, it pointed to an opportunity for the society to liberate itself, while on the other hand, it turned out to be impossible either, as the efforts without outside support proved insufficient.

e. 'Every great democracy started with revolution, in the course of which royal heads may have fallen' – István Bibó wrote in 1945. 'This kind of revolution is not limited to certain periods of social or economic development; social and economic transformation may take place without noticeable political upheavals, but the revolution of human dignity must take place at some moment in order for democracy to emerge'. Modern political revolution can be defined as a

great turning point with mass participation, accompanied by violence in most cases, motivated by the will for individual and collective (political) freedom, representation based on equal rights, coordinated procedures of election. This revolution can be linked to concepts of modernity and progress that are possible in other political systems, but the most worthy framework for them is democracy. 1956, in my opinion, meets this definition. It ruined a political system, although not finally which restricted political freedom, did not guarantee equal rights and representation; and governed by tyrannical rule of authority. In addition the country was tied to an empire of a very different culture. What the revolutionaries wanted to create upon the ruins of the Soviet system, remained undeveloped. There was no time to discuss the proposals. Therefore 1956 is a forever open-end story. It can be interpreted as a revolt against the totalitarian submission attempt, as an attempt of returning to liberal democracy, or to create a somehow new and truly self-governing socialism; and it was clearly a struggle of a nation for its identity and freedom.

Three remarks on memory of 1956

a. The treatment of Hungarian refugees after 1956 was a natural part of remembrance of the Revolution. Intellectuals living abroad had had a unique role in creating and developing the remembrance of 1956, among others its historiography. But the that time refugee crisis has a special message in these days. Although the differences in number, cultural distance in comparison of the actual wave are clear, the appearance of the two hundred thousands apparently generated a crisis sixty years ago. Hungarians were rather strangers, some people coming outside Europe from the mid-fifties point of view. Beyond the Iron Courtain there was a land „where lions live”. Telling the story of overwhelming solidarity towards Hungarian refugees has an important role now. There are forces all around the continent with claim to withdraw from the culture of solidarity. There are even states in Europe with official politics of xenophobia and with certain intentions for closing borders and societies.

b. Fifty-six had a strong influence on Hungary's image in the 20th century. For the pre-revolutionary image of Hungary and the Hungarians had hardly been flattering; indeed it had tended to be unfavourable since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Little occurred between the two world wars to improve it, and Hungary's wartime alliance with Hitler had done it further damage. Although the Soviet occupation had made the country a victim, that did not alter the image of the Hungarians much.

In 1956, however, the revolution changed all this. *Budapest* became a code word representing that the subjugated societies refused the the Soviet-type system totally. It meant that without further connotations. The nationalism that had previously branded Hungarians as causing unrest

in the region (a claim often unjust and overly exaggerated) did not emerge during the revolution. Fifty-six made Hungary “different” in the eyes of the West, picking it out from the uniformity of “Eastern Europe”. And it remained so for a long time. In 1989 the remembrance of 56 had a key role as a moral ground for all the forces engaged for democratic transition – so this identification of Hungary with 56 became even stronger. This image, however, belongs to the past, just as is described in the lyrics of a popular Hungarian song: *now it's passing...[most múlik pontosan]* Sadly enough, since the 50th anniversary, present-day Hungary's image is a shadow hanging over the view of 1956 Budapest.

c. The 60th anniversary commemoration did not much about it; if so, to the wrong direction. Prime Minister delivered a speech on 23 October in front of the Parliament building – taking the opportunity to create a strange parallel between the fight for freedom in 1956 and that of today, against the EU institutions. State-run commemorial committee designed a strong visual brand of a new 56, exposing giga-posters with images of armed rebels as the only heroes of the Revolution. All the others, Nagy included, were dropped from this one-dimensional panopticum. This old-style effort of memory policy, however, proved to be a failure. A figure on a famous photo from the 1956 *Life* magazine was incorrectly identified. A notorious storyteller, an actor having been decorated with a couple of state orders since 2005 for his participation in the revolution, claimed himself to be on the picture. But as the photographer Michael Rougier described, it was shot on another 15-years-young guy. He was an orphan apprentice, who committed insignificant common crimes some years later, then lived a normal life till he died in 2000. Clearly he understood quite less with the significance of the events he participated, and even was ready to tell about it to late-Kadarite propaganda tv-programs. When historians publicly criticized the mistake, the head of the commemorial committee called it 'a well-organized leftist attack against the memory of heroes of the Hungarian nation'. The scandale proved the failure of modern technics of history-using in post-modern times. The one-dimensional figure created by this type of memory policy stepped down the wall suddenly, took dimensions and even started to tell his life story. An adequate remembrance work would have been to listen to it, think it over and try to understand the life-course he took through the unhappy 20th century. Perhaps to make it be a subject for a 21th century discourse. What place Hungary's '56 obtains in it is still an opened question.