

## EDITORIAL

### TWO HUNGARIAN UPRISINGS: 1956 AND 2006

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Karl Marx began his analysis of counter-revolution in nineteenth century France with the epigraph, “all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice... the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (Marx 1852). So it goes in twenty-first century Central and Eastern Europe. This fall, international media coverage of Central and Eastern Europe was dominated by images of Hungarians fighting in the street—fifty-year-old images of the 1956 Uprising and new images from mass demonstrations and rioting in Budapest in late September. Demonstrators and some media accounts drew parallels between the two sets of images (Koranyi and Peto 2006), but anthropology offers the tools to attend to situate meanings, images, and narratives in context—teasing out the differences between tragedy and farce in a region where people often use historical allegories to talk about current political events (Rév 2005).

Although Hungary is a small country of 10 million people, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was an historical event of global importance. Idealistic citizens and political leaders rose up to break free from Soviet dominance. The 1956 revolutionaries carried a diverse array of hopes in their hearts. They came from across the political spectrum—Imre Nagy, the martyred leader of the revolution, was a lifelong communist who became disillusioned with the Party and wanted Hungary to be a neutral, social democracy. His “New Course” program sought to reestablish civil liberties, end the unpopular collectivization of farms, and move away from the Soviet economy’s emphasis on centrally planned, heavy industry. What the 1956 revolutionaries had in common was a shared vision of Hungarian citizens ruling themselves in a multiparty democracy, and a willingness to put their lives on the line to achieve that goal.

Following 1956, conditions in Hungary worsened and then gradually improved, partially achieving some of the Revolution’s stated goals over time. Immediately following the Revolution, there was retrenchment and repression by the Soviet-dominated Hungarian state, and many people fled the country for their lives. By the mid-

1960s, though, Hungary’s Party had embarked on a process of gradual liberalization—a strategy that became known as “Goulash Communism.” This included the introduction of market-based economic policies that gave farmers more autonomy and made goods and services more widely available to Hungarian consumers. This is why Hungary rarely had the kind of food shortages that were experienced in other parts of the Soviet bloc. Trailing behind the economic policies was an easing of the more extreme forms of political repression like imprisonment of dissidents. The 1956 Revolution was the invisible impetus behind these gradual changes, which immeasurably improved the daily lives of Hungarians during the 1970s and 80s. These gradual changes also gave Hungary an advantage in the run-up to European Union accession. Those Hungarians who remained in Hungary paid a high price for the 1956 revolution, but they and their children also eventually reaped some benefits from it—enjoying the fruits of market reforms alongside the security of a socialist welfare state.

Hungarians often express their views on contemporary politics through the use historical allegories (Lampland 1990; Sinkó 1989), and since 1989, the symbolic meaning of many historical events has been up for grabs. Almost every year, there have been nationwide discussions of the significance of the 1956 Revolution—it was a culmination of national morality and independence. But in a multiparty democracy, memories of 1956 are also highly politicized, with each party presenting itself as the legitimate heir of the revolution’s political ideals. A recent Hungarian op-ed spoke out against politicians’ *ötvenhatoskodás*—which means “playing 56” (Tóta 2006).

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 revolution is especially politically charged this year because the international media is paying attention and because of the demonstrations that rocked the streets of Budapest late this September in response to a major government scandal. A tape leaked to the press featured Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány admitting that he and his Socialist Party-led government lied about Hungary’s

finances and made completely untenable promises about social spending in order to win the spring elections. Thousands of protesters from the political opposition gathered in front of Parliament, stormed the Hungarian Television headquarters, and engaged in confrontations with the police. Politicians from FIDESz (the leading party of the right) instructed supporters to boycott any 1956 commemoration events with Socialist Party officials present and presented this fall's demonstrators as successors to the 1956 revolutionaries. On the weekend of the official anniversary ceremonies, riot police used rubber bullets, water cannons, and tear gas to break up demonstrations, and the European Union has asked for an investigation of police conduct.

The media images of this fall's protesters in front of the same buildings that revolutionaries stormed in 1956 are striking, but there are some important differences between 1956 and 2006:

1. In 1956, Hungarians rose up against a state apparatus that was completely dominated by the Soviet Union. In 2006, demonstrators are rising up to protest the rhetoric and actions of an elected government in a multi-party system.
2. In 1956, revolutionaries built bridges between nationalists and social democrats because they had a shared vision of Hungary as a multi-party system freed from Soviet domination. In the case of the 2006 demonstrations, there is no such unified "other," and no such bridges are being built between opposing political parties. Hungarians today, however, are citizens in a pluralistic democracy, and they can vote officials out of office when they don't like them. The main danger is that Hungarians will be so disgusted by government scandals that they will become politically apathetic.
3. In 1956, many revolutionaries were behind Imre Nagy's "New Course," which called for the end of unpopular communist economic policies like the collectivization of farms. In 2006, although protesters are largely from the right, the policies they oppose are the new Socialists' fiscal austerity measures and cuts in social spending. Cutting state programs is politically unpopular, but the governments of the EU's newest member-states are under considerable external pressure to cut state expenditures or be excluded from the Eurozone.

The 1956 Revolution changed political life in countries far removed from Hungary because so many progressives around the world became disillusioned with Soviet-style communism and sought more democratic strategies, leading to the establishment of grassroots social movements and (in Western Europe at least) social democratic parties. 1956 discredited the Stalinist model, leading to subtle but far-reaching ripple effects in the political landscape of countries across the globe. The Hungarian demonstrations of 2006, although they drew from a more limited range of the political spectrum, point to a central question facing citizens throughout the region today—how can citizens' demands for responsive government and a social safety net can be reconciled with external pressures (from the EU and other transnational institutions) on states to cut spending and to toe the neoliberal line?

## References

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