

Károly Nagy

The Legacy of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*

Liberty, democracy, human rights are like health. Servitude, oppression, discrimination are like sickness. Totalitarian tyranny is death. A revolution that overthrows tyranny and achieves liberty is a resurrection. During the last week of October and the first few days of November, 1956, most of us in Hungary felt as if we were risen from the dead.

It was euphoria — we sang our long-forbidden national anthem, embraced each other on the streets, laughed and cried with joy, we felt redeemed. We were intoxicated by hearing and saying words of truth. And it was also serious and sober determination — we were feverishly drafting proclamations, drew up lists of demands, proposals and plans to eliminate all instruments and institutions of dictatorship and to construct a new, humane society. And we were organizing autonomous local, democratic self-governing bodies to realize those plans.

It was this resurrection, this hope, this truth, this creative planning and democratic organization that was crushed by the massive armed aggression of the Soviet Union. The joyful song of freedom was silenced again by the horrifying sounds of war, the terror of prison cells, torture chambers and the gallows.

What can be learned from the drama of those twelve days? What is the legacy of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution? Its international significance cannot be overemphasized. From the contemporary perspective it is increasingly obvious that the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was the event that began the fall of the modern Soviet Empire. Milovan Djilas wrote in Belgrade: “The revolution in Hungary means the beginning of the end of Communism.” (Milovan Djilas: “The Storm in East Europe”, *The New Leader*, New York; XXXIX, 47; November 19, 1956, p. 6.) The French philosopher Albert Camus remarked: “With the first shout of insurrection in free Budapest, learned and shortsighted philosophies, miles of false reasoning and deceptively beautiful doctrines were scattered like dust. And the truth, the naked truth, so long outraged, burst upon the eyes of the world.” (Király, Béla. et al. ed.: “The First War Between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Its Impact. Social Science Monographs, Brooklyn College Press, NY. 1984, p. 81.)

And once this truth— this naked truth —was revealed in all its powerful simplicity, no amount of subsequent propaganda— perpetrated by some to this day!— was able to reestablish the grotesque wall of Orwellian lies trying to define was a peace, oppression as freedom, defensive patriotism as belligerent nationalism, revolution as counterrevolution. We learned the truth and demonstrated it to the World, that what defines a country, what qualifies a society is not any ideology, but the presence or absence of freedom. All ideologies, all doctrines, whether they be called fascism or anti-fascism, communism, or anti-communism, racism, capitalism, socialism, ethnicism or religious fanaticism, can be used in attempts to justify violence and legitimize oppression.

Truth was an effect, just as the elemental need of truth was a cause, of the Revolution. As the United Nations’ Special Committee recorded it: “‘We wanted freedom and not a good comfortable life’, an eighteen year-old girl student told the Committee. Even though we might lack bread and other necessities of life, we wanted freedom. We, the young people were particularly hampered because we were brought up amidst lies. We continually had to lie. We could not have a healthy idea, because everything was choked in us We wanted freedom of thought...’ It seemed to the Committee that this young student’s words expressed as concisely as any the ideal which

made possible a great uprising. "(United Nations Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary, General Assembly, Official Records: Eleventh Session, Supplement No 18. A/3592; New York, 1957 p. 68.)

We wanted freedom and freedom means sovereignty, autonomy, self-determination. To realize these goals, instruments of self-governance had to be created. Spontaneously and yet almost simultaneously within a few days Revolutionary Councils, National Councils, Workers' Councils were organized in the entire country. Many considered those Councils the singularly most remarkable, most significant achievement of the Revolution. As Hannah Arendt noted in her milestone book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "When we ponder the lesson of the Hungarian Revolution" we find that there was "no chaos, no looting, no trespassing of property. There were no crimes against life either, for the few instances of public hanging of ÁVO officers were conducted with remarkable restraint and discrimination. Instead of the mob rule which might have been expected, there appeared immediately, almost simultaneously with the uprising itself the Revolutionary and Workers' Councils. The rise of the councils was the clear sign of a true upsurge of democracy against dictatorship, of freedom against tyranny. One of the most striking aspects of the Hungarian Revolution is not only that this principle of the council system reemerged, but that in twelve short days a good deal of its range of potentialities could emerge with it..." (in: Király, Op. Cit. pp. 151-156.)

The Hungarian people's emphasis on the revolutionary councils also represented the fact that the overwhelming will of the nation was not only negation but affirmation, not only destruction but construction. The elimination of all inhuman structures was to be the prerequisite for the creation of humane structures and functions of a new society.

Twelve days are, of course, not enough to achieve democracy. But twelve days, indeed, the first few days of the Revolution proved to be enough to establish one of the most important preconditions for democracy: a state of self-confidence, a state of no longer having to be afraid. The state of paralyzing, constant and omnipresent fear was lifted from our hearts. And with that, the construction of democracy began. As one of the great Hungarian political theorists, István Bibó observed: "Being a democrat means, primarily, not to be afraid." (Bibó, István: *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination, Selected Writings*, edited by Károly Nagy; Social Science Monographs, and Atlantic Research and Publications, NJ 1991, p. 42.)

It was this same István Bibó, whose personal courage became symbolic when the Soviet forces crushed the Revolution. As the sole member of the new revolutionary government of Imre Nagy present in the Parliament building on November 4th, Sunday morning, when Soviet artillery, tanks and airplanes unleashed their fire-power against Budapest, Bibó sat down at a desk to type a proclamation. A typewriter confronting tanks. Reason facing treacherous terror. Words and thoughts battling bullets...

Wrote Bibó that morning: "Hungary's fullest intention is to live in the community of those free Eastern European nations which want to organize their societies on the principles of liberty, justice, and freedom from exploitation. The people of Hungary have sacrificed enough of their blood to show the world their devotion for freedom and truth. (Bibó, Op. Cit., pp. 325-326.)

Amidst the roar and rattle of guns he finished typing his proclamation with this foreboding sentence: "May God protect Hungary!"

So: what is the legacy of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution? Among other possible important elements, perhaps that legacy is the significance of the fundamental human need for truth, for self-determination, for freedom from fear, for democracy, for the achievement of which no sacrifice seems to be too great.

And this legacy, this message is certainly not just Hungarian and, of course, no mere museum-piece, relevant only to a frozen moment in the distant past. This legacy is not just there and then, but here and now, and let us hope: everywhere and tomorrow as well. As, again, István Bibó expressed it in 1957, just before his imprisonment: "It is the Hungarian people's task to honor and safeguard— against slander, forgetting and fading —the banner of their Revolution, which is also the banner of a freer future for mankind." (Bibó, Op. Cit., p. 352.)

NOTES

In Károly Nagy and Péter Pastor, eds., *The Legacy of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Five Participants forty Years Later* (New Brunswick, NJ 1996), pp. 31-36. 1 Milovan Djilas, "The Storm in East Europe" in *The New Leader* 39. (1956) 47:6. 2 Béla K. Király et al., ed., *The First War between Socialist States: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Its Impact* (Highland Lakes, NJ 1984), p. 81.

3 United Nations, Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary, General Assembly, Official Records: Eleventh Session, Supplement no. 18 A/3592 (New York, 1957), p. 68. 4 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), pp. 151-156.

5 Károly Nagy, ed., István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination, Selected Writings* (Highland Lakes, NJ, 1991), p. 42.

6 Ibid., pp. 325-326. 7 Ibid., p. 352.

The Ideas of the Hungarian Revolution, Suppressed and Victorious 1956-1999

Edited by Lee w. Congdon and Béla K. Király, *Social Science Monographs*, Boulder, Colorado

Atlantic Research and Publications, Inc., Highland Lakes, New Jersey

Distributed by Columbia University Press, New York 2002

*This article first appeared in "The Legacy of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution" (Károly Nagy and Péter Pastor ed.), Bessenyei György Kör, Hungarian Alumni Association.

Károly Nagy

He was elected president of a revolutionary council in Erdősmecke in 1956, and consequently fled to the United States. Trained as a sociologist at Rutgers and the New School, he currently teaches at the college level in New Jersey. He has published extensively in both English and Hungarian, and is both in the New Brunswick, NJ, Hungarian community as well as in Hungarian linguistic circles