

The role of Hungary in the collapse of Communism in Europe

Istvan Hegedus, Toronto

In an article “After The Fall: 1989, Twenty Years On” in the 2009 summer issue of “World Affairs”, Professor Joshua Moravchik of Johns Hopkins University wrote the following:

“Nineteen eighty-nine was a most extraordinary year. There are other years that are imprinted on historic memory, but most of them were occasions for horrible events (1917 or 1939) or disappointing ones (1789 or 1848) or the conclusions of great tragedies (1648 or 1945). The year 1989 was that rare moment when dramatic things happened that were overwhelmingly beneficent. As we watched the world change before our eyes, we learned many things. Looking back today on how the world has evolved in twenty years since that momentous time, we can distill several additional insights .

The economist Robert Heilbroner wrote in 1989: “Less than 75 years after it officially began, the contest between capitalism and socialism is over: capitalism has won.” This outcome reflected a startling reversal because as recently as the decade before, socialism—considering all its diverse forms lumped together—seemed at the apex of its global sweep, apparently confirming Marx’s prophecy that it was not merely desirable but destiny.

Hungary, because of its strategic location between Germanic and Slavic parts of Europe could not help but be in the centre of all these events, and played a pivotal role in 1989 to bring Soviet –style communism to an inglorious end.. One can add that the events of 1989 also lead to the birth of a continent-wide, democratic European Union.

The seventy five year period between 1914 and 1989 has been described as the period of world wars, not only those officially designated as such, but also the inter war period (1919-1939), which had its conflicts , and the Cold War as well. When one looks at this period from a Hungarian perspective, it is probably one of the most trying seventy-five years in Hungary’s long and difficult history. The First World War, as is well known, was started as the Habsburg Monarchy declared war on Serbia for the assassination of the heir apparent,

Franz Ferdinand and his consort. The then Prime-Minister of Hungary, Count Istvan Tisza was resolutely opposed the war, but was eventually over-ruled by the more bellicose members of the Imperial Council, the Reichsrat. While Hungary eventually supported the war effort, it found itself in the unfortunate position as being blamed for its outbreak not only by the groups that later benefited from its dismemberment, such as the Little Entente (Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia), but also by opportunistic Austrian politicians who tried to shift attention away from the clearly dominant role that their country enjoyed in the Dual Monarchy, and apportion the blame for all its ills on Hungary.

The defeat of the Central Powers, and the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, soon to be called the Soviet Union, opened up Central Europe to its first experience of Communism in 1919. The Hungarian Commune under the leadership of a little fanatic called Bela Kun lasted only 133 days, yet this period left a legacy of anti-communist feeling in Hungary as Kun and his “Lenin boys” instituted a reign of “Red Terror” against whomever they deemed as “an enemy of the people”. Kun’s Bolshevik regime was finally brought to its knees by the Romanian occupation of Hungary and Admiral Miklos Horthy’s National Government.

The brief emergence of Bolshevism in Central Europe further added to the political isolation of Hungary in the eyes of the victorious allies who were already determined to dismember it. The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 reduced the area of historic Hungary by 72%, and the spoils of victory were held by hostile neighbours, a situation that still exists, in essence, in 2009. Proportionately, Hungary had, by far, the most severe terms inflicted on it by the victorious Allies among the defeated Central Powers.

The Horthy regime that lasted until October 1944 had to cope not only with the drastic effects of the Treaty of Trianon, but also the scars left by the 1919 Commune. It was strongly anti-Communist and for this it had the support of the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian nation. The unfortunate consequence of this policy and of the White Terror that briefly followed Kun’s defeat was to push certain influential non-Communist left-wingers, such as Count Mihaly Karolyi, Hungary’s Kerensky, and Oszkar Jaszi into exile, where they expended a great deal of energy to demonize Horthy’s regime in the eyes of West European, especially British media and political circles, and to idealize the “democratic” credentials of the successor states, especially Czechoslovakia, while ignoring the real suffering of millions of Hungarians who found themselves in the vengeful successor states. The unbending hostility of the victorious Allied Powers and of the Little Entente greatly increased Hungary’s sense of grievance and isolation.

The instability in Central Europe brought on by the harsh terms of the post-war peace treaties, its exposure to Communism, the destruction of long-standing

ruling dynasties, and the formation of artificial successor states, of which only one, Romania, still exists in 2009 in its original form, also lead to the ominous appearance of the Radical Right, which ultimately lead to the Second World War. Hungary was not immune from any of these developments.

Hungary 's complex role during the Second World War was for quite some time misrepresented by Marxist historians. These historians simply described Horthy and his era as a "fascist"period, a view no doubt influenced by his anti-communism, yet while not idealizing it, and given Hungary's isolated political situation, it is grossly misleading to characterize it as such. The Hungarian political class, including the Regent, Miklos Horthy, with some significant exceptions, realized that however unjustly Hungary had been treated in 1920 an alliance with Hitler would not provide a solution to its problems. Yet in the end, while on the whole successfully protecting its large Jewish population until March 1944, Hungary became a reluctant ally of Nazi Germany and participated in the attack against the Soviet Union.

The defeat of Nazi Germany and the counter-attack of the Soviet army in Eastern Europe resulted in Hungary's occupation by the USSR. Again, Marxist historians labelled all those Hungarians who fought tooth and nail against the invaders simply as fascists. But the well-known atrocities committed by the Soviet Army in Hungary, the negative memory of the1919 communist revolution, stiffened the resistance of the population. The Soviets did put an end to the Nazi and Arrow Cross atrocities against Hungary's Jews, but they did not bring freedom to Hungary because the Russian people itself was not free. The fate of Raoul Wallenberg, the saviour of Budapest's Jews, who was in 1945 kidnapped by the Soviets only to die in the Gulag in still unsolved circumstances, cruelly illustrated Hungary's new predicament.

Stalin began extracting swift revenge on the Hungarian population. Young men and women, civilians and soldiers, including the author's eighteen year old uncle, were picked off the street, and shipped off to the Gulag in the Soviet Union. By some estimates, 100 000 Hungarian civilians suffered such a fate, not including the prisoners of war, most of whom died under the inhuman conditions of their captivity. Free elections were held during the immediate post-1945 years, and Hungarians overwhelmingly voted for the democratic parties. The communists, many of whom were exiles of Kun's regime who returned to Hungary with the Soviet army, at first tried to play by democratic rules, however the population consistently repudiated them at the ballot box. By the 1948, called the "Year of the change", the democratic facade quickly disappeared, and Hungary, together with the other countries in Eastern Europe became a communist dictatorship. That year marked the beginning of one of the darkest periods in Hungary's long history.

Hungary dictator, a man by the name of Matyas Rakosi, a comrade of Kun from 1919, instituted a reign of intimidation and mass terror on the whole population,

and began a series of economically disastrous decisions, all in the name of class warfare and Marxist orthodoxy. Tens of thousands were incarcerated in makeshift concentration camps from centre-left politicians such as Bela Kovacs to left-wing poets such as Gyorgy Faludi; hundreds were executed, including members of rival factions within the Communist party. The leaders of Hungary's historic churches, Cardinal Mindszenty, Calvinist Bishop Laszlo Ravasz, and Lutheran Bishop Lajos Ordass were all arrested, and in Mindszenty's case, tortured. Ironically, the de facto ruler of Hungary after the failed uprising of 1956, Janos Kadar, was tortured and was one of the victims of the internecine quarrels within the Communist party. Freedom of movement, of conscience, of assembly was all abolished; farms were forcibly collectivised, and small businesses nationalized with disastrous consequences for the economy. The iron curtain, to use Winston Churchill's very apt description, a long barrier consisting of barbed wire and mine-fields was erected between Austria and Hungary, so people could not leave without risking their lives. The population was kept in constant terror by the regime's network of informers, usually individuals with axes to grind against the rest of society.

The spontaneous outbreak of the Uprising of October 1956 resulted in the most serious challenge to Communist and Soviet power up to that point. The demands of the students and workers, supposedly the pillars of the regime, were moderate by any standards of democracy. Yet after of ten days of heady freedom, the Hungarian Uprising was crushed by Soviets tanks and a vengeful communist regime was reinstalled. Up to two thousand Hungarians lost their lives fighting the invaders, several hundred, including Prime Minister Imre Nagy, a communist who sided with his people, were executed, and two hundred refugees poured into Austria and Yugoslavia to flee the wrath of the regime.

The crushing of the Uprising had a profound effect of "progressives", that is, fellow-travellers, communist-sympathisers and genuine idealists in Western Europe, especially in France, all of whom who saw the raw brutality of Soviet power in action against the reasonable demands of a whole nation. While Soviet propaganda tried to malign the "October events" as the work of fascists, the facts spoke for themselves resulting in an irreversible loss of face for communist ideology. Many of the activists in the USSR during the 1970's and 1980's took their inspiration from Hungary's failed Uprising of 1956.

The harshness of the early years of Janos Kadar's regime gradually dissipated as time passed. Through a series of liberalising reforms, and the accumulation of considerable foreign debt, life in Hungary became tolerable as long as the political status quo was unchallenged. Kadar's thirty three year rule was often described as "Goulash communism", and Hungary was dubbed as the happiest barrack in the Soviet sphere. It was also described as the era of soft dictatorship, the essentials of the regime remaining unchanged.

The confluence of events in the West : the rise of Conservatives in Britain and the United States, the election of the charismatic Pope John Paul II, and the brave resistance of the Polish Solidarity movement began to take its toll on the Soviet Empire ruled in rapid of succession by decrepit Stalinist rulers. A new man, Mikhail Gorbachev soon became the leader of the Soviet Union whose ambitions were to modernize the crumbling system, and come to an agreement with the West.

The winds of change began to be felt in Eastern Europe by the summer of 1989. In Hungary, Janos Kadar died on the same day as his nemesis, the man he replaced in 1956 and had executed , Imre Nagy, was given a state funeral, and the events of 1956 were properly described for the first time by the government as a people's revolution, rather than as a fascist counter-revolution. The funeral, attended by hundreds of thousands of Hungarians also gave rise to a charismatic young politician, Viktor Orban, who gave a rousing speech demanding the withdrawal of the Soviets from Hungary, and free elections.

Events unfolded rapidly as hundreds of East Germans began to enter Hungary. The new Prime Minister, Miklos Nemeth had already taken steps to dismantle the "iron curtain", which had to be rebuilt after 1956, and as the East Germans began to assemble near the Austrian border, a decision was made by a young Hungarian border guard, Arpad Bella, to simply allow them to cross into Austria. The Hungarian government did not do anything, and in Nemeth's words, they were not sure how the Soviets would react, who after all still had 80 000 troops stationed in Hungary. Nothing happened. Gorbachev decided that Hungary should be allowed to make an independent decision thereby implementing the "Sinatra doctrine"- a great improvement on the Brezhnev doctrine- to allow the East European states do things "their own way". By September 11, the Hungarian government completely opened the country's western border, allowing all East Germans to cross into Austria.

The dominoes began to fall. Protests began to erupt in East Germany, and by November, the new government allowed unimpeded access of its citizens to West Germany, and on November 9th, the most hated symbol of oppression, the Berlin Wall crumbled. The hurricane of freedom quickly swept away all the communist regimes in all of Eastern Europe, and by 1991 the Soviet Union itself was relegated to the dustbin of history.

Hungary which began the twentieth century as a maligned pariah ended it in its more traditional historical role, as a champion of freedom. To paraphrase a speech given in August 2009 by former German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher, *Hungarians had already shown in 1956 how they felt about communism, and in 1989 played a decisive and unequivocal role to bring about its collapse and open the whole of Europe to freedom and democracy.*