

András /Andrew/ Fejérdy<sup>1</sup>  
**The Stalingrad of the Soviet Union**  
**The effects of the 1956 revolution,**  
**as reflected in the western press of the day.**

The western news media of the time initially opined that the events in Hungary were the beginning of a de-Stalinization process in eastern Europe. Observers believed that they did not necessarily pose a threat to the existing order. The temporary victory of the revolution and the announcement of the re-introduction of a multi-party system made it amply clear that the Communist system in Hungary could only be maintained by the intervention of Soviet might. Hence, most of the analysis felt a renewed armed intervention to be the probable, and from Moscow's point-of-view, logical, step; yet, the bitter and disappointed voices subsequent to the November 4 intervention point up that many in the West also had hopes of a miracle. At the time, observers did not regard the Hungarian Revolution as futile, in spite its failure. In the short term, they expected negative consequences -- such as the temporary strengthening of neo-Stalinist trend; however, for the long term, they predicted significant positive effects both for Hungary and world history.

The western press took the view that the most important long-term effect of the Revolution was that it was "the moral Stalingrad of world Bolshevism."<sup>2</sup> They saw the split between the western communist parties as the first sign of a lethal blow to Communism, later to be followed, they calculated, by the loss of prestige of the Soviet Union in the eyes of the 'non-aligned nations.' Western observers arrived at this conclusion by the events of the Revolution: in contrast to the dark prophecies made by Orwell in *1984*, no amount of brainwashing makes a man willingly accept political dictatorship<sup>3</sup> because, as events revealed, the bravest fighters and the intellectual leaders of the Revolution came from among the young, raised in the spirit of Marxism.

In the assessment of the western press, the revolution did not pass without consequences for Hungary. The various evaluations were based on diverse scenarios but they all agreed that, sooner or later, some manner of thaw must occur. According to conventional thinking, the Soviet Union's hegemony over eastern Europe was at risk if Hungary was granted complete independence and

---

1

<sup>2</sup> Hanni Konitzer: *Rußlands moralische Niederlage*. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 1956, November 6, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> "For the most stunning consequence of the Hungarian outbreak was its dramatic revelation of how wrong have been all the Orwellian prophecies of '1984' that man can somehow be brain-washed into acceptance of police dictatorship." Marguerite Higgins: *George Orwell Was Wrong*. In: *New York Herald Tribune*, 1956, November 4, p. 4.

freedom. However, there existed no barrier to permit relative independence to Hungary, still within the Soviet camp, along the lines of Yugoslavia and Poland.

For Hungary, the other major result of the revolution was the change in the image that the western world had of Hungarians, in general. Before the 1956 Revolution, Hungary was rarely mentioned in the western press, allowing stereotypical images of Hungarians, formed in the past, to linger longer in some countries. In the public opinion among the one-time allies of the Soviet Union, a picture of Hungary as a nationalistic -- or even Nazi-friendly -- country continued to exist; on the other side of the front line, Germany lived with the image of a Hungary turned Communist. Western society's revision of their view of Hungarians was significantly influenced by a press providing ample reports of the revolution's events, by journalists on the scene. Through the first hand reports, a general sense of respect evolved towards the Hungarians: their heroic resistance viewed with admiration, and a certain amount of guilt; a resistance which continued even after the freedom fighters understood that they could not count on any direct western assistance, that continued resistance was clearly hopeless.

We can safely say that, in regard to the effects of the Revolution, "as the Spanish Civil War was the outstanding event and political warning and lesson for the world in the inter-war period, so the events of 1956 Hungary were a beacon for the post-1945 world, which showed, through the fight for freedom by a small nation, the weakness and possible passing of the seemingly monolith eastern Bloc."<sup>4</sup> Another significant result of the Hungarian Revolution greets us in the pages of the western press as penned by Timothy Garton Ash, Eastern European expert in Oxford, in creative style: "It is not merely romantic hyperbola or fantasy ... to portray the defeat of 1956 as a victory. Perhaps the simplest and most direct outcome was felt immediately, and proved to be lasting, too. A world-wide sympathy awakened towards Hungary, even in people who took no previous notice of its existence, or carried a rather negative image of it, as the oppressor of minorities before 1914 and an ally of Germany through two world wars."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Péter Gosztonyi: *Svájc és a magyar 1956* [Switzerland and 1956 Hungary]. In: *Kritika* 1990/10, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> György/George/ Litván: *Az 1956-os forradalom szerepe a magyarsággép változásában*. [The role of the 1956 Revolution in the change of Hungary's image] In: *Magyarsággép és történeti változásai* [Hungary's image and its historical changes]. Ed.: Ferenc/Frank/ Pataki and Zsigmond/Sigismund/Ritoók, Budapest, 1999, p. 115. Quotes Timothy Garton Ash's late 1996 article in *The New York Review of Books*.