The changes within the social groups in Hungary

- Outline -

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I. Background and Origins of the Hungarian Revolt

There can be no doubt that the Hungarian revolt was based on the profound restlessness and agitation of primarily one Hungarian class: intellectuals and students. Personal observation and lengthy discussions with numerous participants of the revolt, belonging to all classes and segments of the population, make this point an absolute certainty.

Ever since the Soviet Twentieth Party Congress early in 1956, Communist authorities (in the case of Hungary, the Stalinist Rakosi regime) had fostered the organization and growth of committees and discussion groups of intellectuals, artists, and students. The most high-powered and energetic of these groups, in Hungary, the so-called "Petöfi Circle," also became the most influential.[1]

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1 Ed. note: The Petöfi Circle was set up as a free discussion forum under the auspices of the Communist youth organization DISZ in the spring of 1956. Members of the party "aktiv" in the Writers' Association took a large part in the circle discussion which had nationwide repercussions throughout the summer. The Communist members of the Writers' Association had initiated oppositional activity within the Party in the fall of 1955, when they sent a critical memorandum on the Party's cultural and personnel policies to the Central Committee.

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The original, officially-sanctioned purpose of these discussion groups had been to elucidate on and to popularize the demolition of the Stalin-myth, to assist the Government in the processes of de-Stalinization, and to prepare the country for the limited economic and political liberalization decreed by Moscow. Since intellectuals and students had been hand-picked by the Party, and most of them came from proletarian backgrounds (70%), the Communist regime felt no foreboding of danger before the very last weeks before the revolt.

Actually, however, these student and artists' committees fairly soon assumed the role of social and political critics, whose attitudes became increasingly less Communist in the orthodox sense, but presented views based on humanitarian socialist ideals and permeated with a strong undercurrent of "Europeanness." Slowly, an almost religious seeking for "The Truth" supplanted the last vestiges of dialectical Marxism among these committees. Students, especially, went to

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About the same time, the Writers' Association began to use its mouthpiece, the weekly Literary Journal, for public criticism; as a result, the paper's circulation shot upward. In October, after the beginning of the school year, students in the universities seceded from the general youth organization DISZ and set up their own students' organizations. These spearheaded the movement which erupted in the revolt of October 23.

immense lengths to obtain and copy excerpts from Western newspapers (mainly Vienna's Die Presse, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, and Le Monde), in several instances managing to bribe friendly Foreign Ministry clerks to supply these papers from official files for a short-term loan of a few hours. BBC newscasts, the Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe were monitored by specially assigned, rotating crews. Information thus obtained was either mimeographed and clandestinely distributed, or passed on by word of mouth.

It is generally agreed that most professors and teachers gave little or no support to these student[2] activities, but remained cautiously in the background until the actual outbreak of the revolt, when most of them joined their students in the streets or on the barricades. It is also agreed that most of them were fully aware of the activities of the students, and their significance, without taking steps to curb them. It would appear that a vast, overwhelming majority of students, intellectuals, and professional men had been actively involved in this conspiracy; in any case, none could be found to support the Communist regime after October 24, 1956.

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2 The term "student" in this connection denotes young people in both secondary schools and universities.

As regards artists and intellectuals, they had been on the preferred lists to obtain visas to the West (especially Austria) on guided tours on the occasion of cultural events. An amazing number of them had managed on these visits to establish personal contact with their Western counterparts, especially during 1956, and returned to Hungary aglow over the high intellectual and economic standard they had seen.

Other segments of the population were also discontented to the point of potential rebelliousness (for political, but more largely economic reasons), but lacked the cohesive organization. To sum up, on the eve of the revolt, a large majority of the Hungarian population was yearning for profound changes in the mode of their daily lives, but the intellectual elite of the country provided the agency of translating their wishes into words and giving them a wide hearing.

All participants in the revolt in its early stages whom I spoke to agreed that they never planned to start a rebellion in the first place. The parades and demonstrations they arranged for October 23 and 24 were to have been expressions of solidarity with the newly-founded Gomulka regime in Poland, as well as hints to their own Gerő Government[3]

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3 Ed. note: This is misleading. Gerő succeeded Rakosi in July as Secretary General of the Party and chairman of the Central Committee; he was not head of the government. Prime Minister was András Hegedüs.

that it was high time to follow the Polish example. The demonstrations' chief aim was to convince Gerö that the time had come for the government of the Old Stalinists to resign and let a new government under Imre Nagy institute new political and economic reforms, as well as implement old ones to which the Gerö regime had paid little more than lip service. The tenor of these demonstrations was to have been nationalist-liberal, but by no means primarily anti-Russian.

A large number of the participants in these demonstrations whom I spoke to believe firmly that the Soviet forces in Hungary (political and military) viewed the demonstrations without disfavor, and that it was Gerö and his intimates who plotted to turn them into a full-fledged revolt in order to convince the Russians that a liberalizing change in government (Nagy) would be suicidal to Communism. According to these views, Gerö's plot was initially successful -- it was his AVH that first fired on unarmed demonstrators which released pent-up popular fury to a point that seemed to justify (at least to the Russians) his calling in of Russian troops.[4] In the end, however, the immense anger of the

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4 Ed. note: It is characteristic of the mood prevailing among the revolutionaries that many of them attributed

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people, the universal hatred against his regime, and the unexpected weakness of the Russian forces combined to start a series of developments, which in turn forced new moves on the insurgents from which there was no retreating. In a way, it was the very magnitude of the victories of the insurgents in the early stages of the revolt which doomed it to ultimate failure.

II. Leadership of the Revolt

Once the revolt had broken out, its leadership initially lay almost entirely in the hands of the students, intellectuals, and professional men who, almost unwittingly, had started it. They alone had the organization to agree on and attempt to carry through a concerted policy.

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to Gerö a deliberate intention to provoke a revolt. This, however, seems unlikely. While Gerö did feel, in all probability, that a liberalizing change would be suicidal to the Communists, the speech he delivered on October 23 indicates that he wanted to calm the populace rather than provoke them to revolt. The order to open fire upon the crowd seems to have been given in the expectation that the crowd would disperse. When the massacre at the radio building had the opposite effect of touching off general rebellion, the inner circle panicked and called in the Russians. The Soviet government reportedly resented this, and Gerö was removed as Secretary General under Russian pressure.

The workers, the core of whom joined the revolt only on October 25 and after, following the participation of Russian troops in the fighting, took a bit of persuading that this revolt was more than a flash in the pan, a wild attempt at gaining glory by a few hot-headed youngsters.

Now, the very fact that the regime had culled up to 75% of the students of secondary schools and universities from the proletarian classes aided the young rebels immensely in their contact with the workers. Being able to speak their language and understanding their outlook and problems from personal family backgrounds, they could rather quickly establish a feeling of mutual trust and respect. By the end of the first week's fighting, it was clear to any observer that most of the peasants and workers in the ranks of the revolutionaries viewed the young intellectuals with pride, affection, and respect -- somewhat in the fashion of an American elevator man whose son had gone to college and was now "making out." Certainly during the first ten days of the revolt, these young intellectuals served as liaison between the fighting groups, often acting (not at all unsuccessfully) as mediators in case of clashing interests. Whenever I saw them address a crowd in a working community or a small village, they were listened to respectfully by the people. Whenever they were engaged in

open debate, this was never done rudely, but with a courtesy which somehow reminded me of American college students arguing with their teacher.

The actual leadership of the revolt, however, was soon surrendered by the intellectuals to diverse groups. In the large industrial communities (viz. Győr, Dunapentele, etc.), workers' councils, often made up of well-known trade union figures (Socialists and neo-Communists), assumed executive positions of power.

In more rural areas, especially in the southeast of the country, former leaders of the Smallholders' Party organized the administration of large districts.

In most areas, however, coalitions were formed, representing on the whole a fairly accurate cross-section of the local population. In Győr, for instance, the National-Communist Attila Szigethy quickly established himself as head of the Revolutionary Council; early attempts by a Socialist-Conservative minority in the Council to unseat him proved ineffective. For a day or two there was talk in and around Győr and Sopron that it might come to an armed clash between the left- and right-wing factions, but apparently Szigethy was able to demonstrate that he would not abuse his power, by making substantial and apparently sincere concessions to his

right-wing opposition, which in the end resulted in a loyal collaboration of a left-right coalition.

In Pecs, a Socialist-Conservative coalition ruled for the week Hungary was free. (It was there that monarchist sentiment was reported strong, although I am not able to vouch for this from personal observation.) In Budapest, the coalition prominently included the military, as Col. (later Maj. Gen.) Pal Maleter, the hero of the fighting there, was undoubtedly the most universally loved and respected figure. (Note: On November 2, Maleter, who had been a no-party man,[5] demonstratively joined Nagy's neo-Communist Party. This was popularly considered a quixotic show of loyalty to Nagy, but it in no sense diminished Maleter's popularity, even among the most outspoken anti-Communists. The view was frequently expressed at that time that Maleter's joining of the neo-Communist Party showed his complete integrity and lack of opportunism, since neo-Communism, even under Nagy, was clearly doomed to become a small minority party with limited influence.)

Some dozen regional revolutionary councils, most of them coalitions, then, were ruling Hungary quite independently of

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5 Ed. note: Maleter is reported to have been an old Communist with a record of fighting in the Spanish civil war.

the Nagy Governments (there were at least three in the week prior to November 4th, each more liberal than the preceding one), which held sessions in the Budapest Parliament, but did not even control the city. (A local revolutionary council did that. It is noteworthy that the Secretary of the Budapest Revolutionary Council -- a Socialist named Benkö, a printer from Magyarovar, and an old trade-union leader -- had to countersign any law or decision by a Nagy minister before it became valid in the Budapest area.)

As regards purely military operations, officers of the Hungarian Army or the pre-1948 Honvéd very frequently were accorded, or assumed, positions of command by reason of their experience and skill. In Budapest itself, and reportedly in the eastern part of the country as well, military figures (viz. Pál Maleter and associates) held prominent positions in the revolt, and in many cases had taken sides against the Russian occupation forces in the initial stages. In most sections of the northeast, however, (especially in the triangle Sopron-Györ-Budapest), the military acted merely as somewhat passive supporters of the civilian insurgents and their hastily constituted official bodies. Quite a few of the junior officers and some of the men I talked to seemed bewildered and uncertain of the role they should play. They

had joined the revolt at a fairly late stage, when Communist fortunes were at a low ebb, and their officers, especially, seemed to hanker for some official guidance from Budapest -- if at all possible from their customary command channels.

In illustration, I should perhaps cite an experience a friend of mine (an Englishman) and I had at the Hungarian frontier station at Sopron about noon on October 28. My friend's fiancée was in Budapest, and he was anxious to bring her out with my help. During the previous 48 hours, the border with Austria had been open, and Western newsmen and Austrian tourists had been streaming across, mostly to visit such recently liberated border towns as Sopron, Magyarovar, Győr, etc. Russian armored forces were still blocking the main highways to Budapest, but some Western cars had got through to the capital the previous day.

To recapture the mood of the moment, it may be best to quote rather fully from the notes I made at the time and transcribed shortly thereafter:

For a mile beyond the Austrian customs house (Klingenbach), the broad asphalt road runs through rolling farmland. It stops abruptly at the Austrian border, which is marked by little red-white-and-red flags, stuck into the earth at hundred-yard intervals. From this point, a morass extends to the Hungarian customs house, two hundred yards away. This area was filled with a milling crowd of Hungarian soldiers and civilians, many in those ankle-length trenchcoats which

seem to be so fashionable in East Central Europe. All wore red-white-and-green armbands and cockades with the old Kossuth coat of arms. Large, dirty, unstylish trucks of Hungarian and Russian make were lumbering back and forth through the mud, trying to maneuver themselves into position to receive supplies brought by Austrian convoys.

We decided to leave the car on the Austrian side. Sloshing through ankle-deep mud, we made our way to the customs house. We were greeted by a round, middle-aged and very amiable man with a vast walrus mustache, who turned out to be the chief of the Hungarian supply and Red Cross operation in the Sopron area. With him was a younger man, blond and ineffably gentle, an instructor at the Mining College at Sopron. His position never became entirely clear, but he seemed to be the interpreter and pro tem civilian chief of the customs house. A dozen unshaved and tired-looking soldiers and civilians, armed with submachine guns and rifles, were standing in the room.

We shook hands all round. They did so gravely and firmly, with that passionate fervor in their eyes which I knew so well from the French Maquis in '44.

"Congratulations on a magnificent effort, gentlemen," said Crossley, in German.

The mustachioed doctor smiled. "It is you Austrians who deserve congratulations, not we," he said. "We, after all, had no choice but to fight, but the way you have helped us, with food and medicine...we shall never forget it, never!"

"Yes," said Crossley, "the Austrians are behaving marvelously in this, but we can't take credit. I'm British, you see, and my friend is an American."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then the instructor broke it. "That's all right," he said softly, "you're far away. But your people will help us too, won't they?"

The doctor left us, as an Austrian truck convoy had just arrived at the border for unloading. Crossley explained our desire to be allowed to enter Hungary and make our way to Budapest. "My fiancée is there," he added. "We must get to her."

The young man nodded. "I understand," he said, "and I'll do what I can. I can't promise you anything, though. The final decision rests with the military commander here. These troops joined us only a couple of days ago, and this is the price we have to pay for their help."

He left us and returned shortly with a hatchet-faced first lieutenant, whose face was gray with fatigue. He spoke no German, and seemed polite but reserved when our plans were explained to him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I can't let you pass without a visa or permission from Budapest."

We could not trust our ears. Visas? The Hungarian Legation in Vienna was Communist-controlled, and had been shut tight for the past four days. Permission from Budapest? From whom? The Nagy Government, which was still imploring the Hungarian people to lay down their arms?

The lieutenant was adamant. He would take his orders on such questions where he had always received them: the Foreign Ministry.

Some Hungarian civilians, led by our young friend the instructor, had taken up our cause and were arguing heatedly with the lieutenant. I walked outside to watch supplies being transferred from Austrian to Hungarian trucks. For the sake of efficiency, an Austrian Red Cross column, after some negotiations, was permitted to drive all the way into Sopron.

The Austrian frontier guard was talking to a group of soldiers and civilians. I joined them and found that one of the men was a postal-bus driver, who had just returned from delivering a cargo of blood plasma to Budapest. The main road was closed, he told us, but he had got through to Buda, on the west side of the Danube, by taking secondary roads. Militia barriers and controls were set up everywhere, but the Hungarians passed along good advice on how to avoid the Russians. Biggest rumor along the road was that the head of the Revolutionary Council in Györ, a man named Szigethy, was himself a Communist and would probably be "liquidated" shortly by the anti-Communist councilmen and the people of Györ. Obviously, nothing was settled, even though the countryside seemed completely in Hungarian hands.

I had never been in Hungary before, and had only caught glimpses across the Iron Curtain, with its plowed strip of mine fields and its ominous watchtowers. What could the people of such a state be like? Most of them here were young to middle-aged: they came from all classes -- rugged peasants, gap-toothed workers, and a heavy sprinkling of students and professional men. A few had the stony visages one associates with an Eastern European Communist. One could well imagine that only a week earlier some of these soldiers would have cheerfully obeyed an order to cut down a refugee trying to cross the border. The great majority, though, had warm, open faces, guileless and friendly. A week before I would have thought of them as enemies, if I had seen them through a pair of field glasses walking on the Hungarian side of the frontier.

A passenger car sped up the road from Sopron. It came to a sudden halt. A man jumped out and ran toward us. "Where's the American?" he called in Hungarian. People pointed at me. "Excuse me, sir," he said in English, "but is it true that you are the American Ambassador to Austria who has come here with the British Ambassador?" I assured him that this was unfortunately not the case. The man looked dejected. "Ah," he said, "I'm sorry. We had heard....Of course, I didn't really believe...still, we hoped...." His voice trailed. Abruptly, he ran back to his car, jumped in, and drove off again into Sopron.

Back at the customs house, the lieutenant was on the telephone to Budapest. The line was miraculously working. "Sopron," the officer was shouting into the phone, "Sopron, nem Hegyeshalom...!" Squeaking noises answered from the other end. Hungarian, incidentally, is not spoken, it is sung. Getting an idea across in this language seems to take about as long as a middling-long aria in an Italian opera.

The young instructor told us later that the lieutenant had presented our case fairly and at length. The answer was no. "Sorry," said the lieutenant, "you cannot pass."

Further argument was hopeless. "Try it further north, at Hegyeshalom," said the teacher. "I am terribly sorry about this, but sooner or later you'll make it, you'll see. Good luck!"

I should like to add that we crossed the border two hours later, some 35 miles further north at Hegyeshalom, without difficulty, although I understand that incoming travelers were turned back there also after 5 p.m.

III. Popular Attitudes and Participation in the Revolt

Although sweeping statements of this nature must be taken with a heavy grain of salt, I think it is a fair estimate that one-third of the Hungarian population actively participated in the revolt in one form or another, another third supported it but remained in the background, while the remaining third remained passive. Personal observation convinced me that only an infinitesimal minority of Hungarians actively or passively opposed the patriots. My own guess would place this minority at less than 1 per cent of the population.

The overwhelming majority of the insurgents were young -- under forty, and in most instances under thirty. I remember a few oldsters (especially among the railway and postal employees, as well as among the workers) who participated in the fighting and kept up communications and the supply system between various towns, but by and large it was a revolt of the young. (This would seem to be borne out by

the fact that over 80 per cent of the refugees -- thousands of them -- who passed through the refugee camp I ran at Wiener Neustadt in late November and December were under forty years of age.)

The younger the revolutionaries, the greater appeared to be their fervor. The stories of teen-agers and children attacking Soviet tanks need no further embellisment. It should be noted, however, that these were not isolated instances, but seemed to be the norm. Youngsters of twelve to fourteen ran trucks and competently performed other responsible chores usually reserved for grown-ups. Teen-agers over seventeen were considered adults, and were assigned important combat or administrative posts. It should be noted that whatever their motives, these youngsters were extremely well disciplined (no comparison with the French Maquis I knew in World War II), and there was no hint of rowdyism in their attitudes and behavior. In point of fact, the entire revolt had the strange quality of decency and lawfulness about it -- as though decent citizens had formed a sheriff's posse against a group of powerful gangsters. At the risk of seeming to romanticize the whole affair (which I very decidedly am not doing), I can only say that I never saw a revolt like this in three years of wartime service with

the OSS. In Budapest's Ninth District, for example, I waited for two hours in my parked car, directly across from a camera shop and a clothing store, whose plateglass windows had been completely smashed. The merchandise was practically lying in the street, and the stores were not guarded. For an hour I watched people go by without so much as a passing glance at the cameras, watches, and clothes lying within easy grasp. In a way, this was one of the most powerful experiences of my stay in Hungary, and it was by no means an isolated case.

The quiet, courteous helpfulness of the revolutionary officials and organs, both toward foreigners (which was quite understandable), and toward their fellow-citizens who came to them with personal problems ranging from vital to trivial, made one feel that the insurgents took their duties immensely seriously. Only in their attitude toward members of the AVH (Secret Police) did they behave with the cold brutality revolutionaries customarily show against their enemies. In Budapest, AVH members were hunted down and killed (especially at night) like wild animals. (It is a curious fact that about a dozen refugees at my camp in Wiener Neustadt admitted to me that they had been members of the AVH, but that they hated Communism and, in any case, were afraid to remain in

Hungary and rejoin the subsequently reconstituted Secret Police. They had been handed over to the Austrian police, in some instances at their own request, "for their own safety.")

I regret that I did not have the opportunity to investigate sentiment in the rural districts of Hungary. Driving through small villages, the people seemed much calmer and more detached than those in the cities and towns. The absence of excitement in the open country may have been due to the fact that Russian forces apparently made no attempts to control rural areas, at least east of Budapest, and thus did not raise popular emotions there to a fever pitch; or it may be that the farmers were less well organized than the city people; or again, they may have been content to be left alone and to mind their own business.

One important point to be remembered is that the insurgents, and with them the mass of Hungarian people, believed that they had an excellent chance of winning their freedom. By November 1, a great many people in Budapest felt that victory had already been won. Quite a few people I met between November 1 and 3 were quite seriously laying plans for their future in a free country. Some wanted to open stores, a few (officials in the foreign-trade agencies) planned to start import-export firms, others planned holidays

in the West for the summer of '57. Much of this may have been wishful thinking, but, until November 3, a distinct feeling of optimism was in the air.

IV. Attitudes Toward the Nagy Regime

One of the stranger aspects of the revolt was the changes of attitude undergone by Imre Nagy during the week and a half of his premiership, and the accompanying change in the popular attitude toward him.

When Nagy took over the government from Gerő,[6] he was widely considered a stooge of the Russians,[7] and responsible for calling in Soviet troops to quell the Budapest rebellion. Nagy's agonized appeals for popular support were scorned, especially by a great many of the revolutionary councils in the provinces. Nagy's conciliatory moves and appeals were

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6 Ed. note: Nagy actually took over the government from Hegedűs (see ed. note 3).

7 Ed. note: It would be more correct to say that after Nagy's assumption of the Premiership, his popularity suffered a rude setback: at first, he did not live up to the role people expected him to play. It was announced that he called in the Russian troops and proclaimed martial law against the fighters. This he later denied, saddling Gerő and Hegedűs with the responsibility; but it is a fact that, during the first days of his regime, he concentrated his efforts upon restoring order and disarming the revolutionaries. Nagy's appeals for peace and order were considered as an attempt to liquidate the revolution.

considered a cynical attempt to take over the revolution from the inside. Slowly, as he kept broadening his government with non-Communists, and later anti-Communists, and actually began to implement reforms and policies designed to turn Hungary into a democratic state in which the Communist Party would play a very subordinate role (if any role at all), did he receive an ever-growing measure of popular trust and support from the country.

Initially, after the Russian withdrawal from Budapest, he established a considerable measure of control in the city (although the local Revolutionary Council kept a close watch on the activities of his Government and insisted on approving every Government measure before it could become law). This control was slowly extended to the rest of the country. By November 3, the Nagy Government could claim at least a measure of control over the entire country -- at least to the point where no provincial council was, to the best of my knowledge, actively fighting him.

As one senior member of the staff of Nagy's Ministry of Justice explained it to me, Nagy in the space of a few days was forced to undergo a complete re-evaluation of his political premises. During his years in jail[8] and the

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8 Ed. note: Nagy did not spend years in jail. Up to the spring of 1955, he was Prime Minister. He then was expelled from the Party, to be readmitted early in October of 1956.

subsequent months of comparative political isolation, he had failed to realize the extent to which Hungarian Communism had gone bankrupt. He was aware of widespread dissatisfaction with the Rakosi-Gerö regimes, but believed that there was still time for reform within a Communist framework. When he became premier, he realized with shock and surprise that there simply was no rank and file willing to support any measure of the CP at all. Beyond a small clique of Stalinist "apparatchniks," whom he himself detested, there seemed to be no Communists left in Hungary. Nagy, as a good Hungarian, accepted this evidence and ended up by being quite willing to preside over the liquidation of the Hungarian Communist state, in the hope of ultimately being able to gain new popular support for a new Marxist-Socialist party, operating constitutionally and in complete independence from Moscow. By actively furthering the cause of the revolt, he hoped to gain confidence and popularity, which might serve his new Marxist party in good stead later. In any case, he was completely sincere in his acceptance of democratic methods and a democratic, multi-party state.

Although many Hungarians expressed doubt that Nagy would be successful in establishing a neo-Communist party which could compete with newly re-established Social Democrats,

there can be no question that his personal stature grew immensely and that, by the time of his removal by Russian troops, he was affectionately regarded by wide segments of the population. After all, the non-Communist members of his cabinet -- all highly respected -- seemed to trust him and work with him, and the national hero, Maj. Gen. Pál Maleter, had become his political friend.

In all, there can be no question that a coalition government under Nagy could have reunited the country, given another week or, at the most, two. His arrest by the Russians has increased his popularity even further, and he is generally considered the one Communist who could establish a Hungarian government which would be respected by a majority of the people. Even today, many refugees believe that Nagy may now be brainwashed by the Russians in an attempt to groom him for another chance at the premier post, this time under their own (if discreetly camouflaged) auspices. There is some doubt, however, that Nagy could be made to co-operate.

To sum up popular sentiment, Nagy is generally considered "the only decent Hungarian Communist."

V. Public Administration Under the Nagy Regime

Public administration under the Nagy regime had a sporadic, ad hoc character, occasioned by the fact that a

majority of civil servants either were on strike, or seemed unwilling to expose themselves politically by serving a government which might be overthrown by even more conservative forces within days. Only when the Nagy Government had achieved a certain stature and a measure of prestige, on November 2 and 3, did the civil-service machinery begin to function again.

Even then, mail service was highly uncertain, only an occasional train moved between one town and another, police functions were in the hands of the military and the revolutionary militia, and only the district register offices seemed to function fairly normally. District register offices apparently serve the same general function as American county court houses, but their chief duty at the time appeared to be the distribution of staple foods, which were brought into Budapest by militia trucks; after October 30, there seemed to be ample supplies of bread and rolls, flour, vegetables, and sausage meats, which were stored in the register offices and distributed to long queues of citizens. During that week, Budapesters ate about as well and as much as Englishmen during 1945.

To give an illustration of the functioning of public services at that time, another review from my notes appears

to be in order. My friend Crossley, wanting to marry his Hungarian fiancée so as to be able to take her out of Hungary with British papers, was informed by the British Consulate that the marriage, by law, had to be performed by Hungarian civil authorities. The Eighth District Register Office was around the corner from the Consulate, and, we were told, might be open for business that day, November 2. It was.

Making our way through thick crowds of Hungarians waiting to draw their daily food ration, we passed the uniformed guards by flashing our British and American passports, and climbed over bags of potatoes and flour to reach the second floor, where the marriage-licence bureau was located. The clerk in charge, a small, excited man, seemed confused (no marriage problem between a foreigner and a Hungarian had ever before come to his attention), but was willing to help.

After a half-dozen phone calls to various superior bodies and ministries, the procedure to be followed was established: (1) The Ministry of Justice would have to approve the marriage of a Hungarian citizen with a foreigner; (2) the Budapest Revolutionary Council would have to approve the Ministry's approval; (3) the marriage would have to be performed and registered by the Chief of the Bureau of Marriages of the Register Office of the Thirteenth District, the girl's legal residence.

At the Ministry of Justice on Szabadsag Ter, a weather-beaten peasant in uniform stopped us at the gate. We explained our business, and he told us to wait while he checked into the matter. A few minutes later, he reappeared with a tall, distinguished gentleman with receding, prematurely grey hair, who joined us outside in the rain. He introduced himself in excellent English as a Ministerialrat.[9] "I shall be delighted

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9 A very high official in the civil service.

to oblige you," he said, "but of course you understand that these are unusual times. I think we'll be able to arrange everything for you, but it may take a while. The Register Offices close at 1 p.m., and won't open again till tomorrow morning. If you want to get married today, we'll have to hurry. Please wait in the car, while I see what I can do."

Twenty minutes later, he returned and asked us up to his office. The Ministry seemed deserted -- Dr. K. explained that most of the secretaries were still on strike -- and we were asked to wait in his cluttered, rather untidy office. We settled ourselves in old, dusty leather chairs, under a faded, apparently forgotten color print of Lenin.

A quarter of an hour later, Dr. K. returned, smiling happily. The Minister had signed the permission for the marriage and was extending his sincere congratulations to the bride and groom. To save time, Dr. K. would come along to Parliament and discuss the matter with the Chairman of the Revolutionary Council, Mr. Benkő.

We arrived at the Parliament by the Danube at a quarter past eleven. It was flanked by a dozen Hungarian tanks, drawn up in firing position. A company of soldiers was guarding the building. We parked the car beside a tank and walked to the entrance, where the man from the Ministry explained our mission to the sergeant in charge. Waiting for permission to proceed, we studied the pattern that bullet holes had made in the thick glass doors -- the only sign of armed struggle in the building. A dozen petitioners were waiting, discussing their problems and wishes with the sergeant, who dealt with them in an unvaryingly grave and gentle manner. The man was gray with fatigue, but his brown eyes never lost their courteous, compassionate interest. Then word was brought that we could proceed.

Inside, the Parliament was an oasis of magnificence in a drab, sorry Budapest. Wide, marble corridors were covered with thick red carpets. The graceful baroque ceiling decorations and the heavy gilt everywhere were perfectly kept up.

On the second floor, we were ushered into a large ceremonial office, hung with medieval tapestries and furnished in baroque style. Through the large French window, the magnificent lines of the old imperial residence showed through

the drizzle. The only incongruity of the scene were some enlisted mens' uniform coats draped over a few of the chairs, and a very large radio softly giving the news in Hungarian.

Very shortly, a middle-aged gentleman entered -- Mr. Benkő, the printer from Magyarovar -- and spoke to us in soft Viennese German. He congratulated bride and groom, expressed his pleasure at being able to perform so pleasant a function, and wished us all the very best of luck. He signed a document, and we bowed our way out of the Parliament.

The Register Office of the Thirteenth District lies far out in one of the less attractive areas of North Budapest. Factories alternate with dilapidated one-story shacks. The building itself is a fairly large mud-colored complex of postwar design. The crowded hallways smelled of sweat and urine, and again there were food lines. But the Marriage Licence Bureau had a warm, snug air. The walls inside were mud-colored too, but the friendly middle-aged secretaries with their ledgers, their old Underwood typewriters, and their potted coleus and rubber plants exuded an air of quiet respectability. Methodically, competently, without curiosity, the clerical machinery moved along its appointed course.

Half an hour later, the last form had been filled in and the last signature affixed. A handsome certificate was handed to the bride. We turned to leave. "Just a moment," said one of the secretaries, "you have forgotten the ceremony!"

We were led into a slightly larger room, decorated with a large Hungarian flag. A lectern stood at the far end of the room under the flag, and chairs were placed before it. Fresh flowers were in the vases.

A balding official in a dirty, unpressed suit, wearing a magnificent red-white-and-green sash around his waist, entered the room and posted himself behind the lectern. Dr. K. from the Ministry and I stood in back, to serve as witnesses. The couple stood before the official at the lectern. In melodious Hungarian, he spoke of the seriousness of the marriage act, of the responsibility of the partners toward each other and toward society, of the beauty of the moment. He then intoned the ritual questions. "Congratulations," said the official, as the last "igen" had echoed away, shook hands all around, took off his sash, and sat down to a sandwich lunch. It was just one o'clock.

VI. The Supply Situation in Budapest, October 25 - November 4

Until the reoccupation of Budapest by Soviet forces, there was a certain food shortage, but no hint of famine, in Budapest. Throughout the fighting, until October 30, many food stores were open, though at irregular hours. Fresh meats, fruit, and vegetables were, of course, lacking, but there was a fair amount of staple foods -- flour, beans, rice, bacon, etc.

Toward the end of October, just before the Russians evacuated the city, there were some anxious days, when the city storehouses were getting empty but no new food supplies were reaching Budapest from the country. Even before the last Soviet soldier had left the city, however, militia trucks brought large quantities of food from the farm areas. Even city buses were pressed into service, and ranged as far as the Austrian border and the far south.

By November 2, the food situation had become normal to the point that fresh meats and vegetables (cabbage, peppers, salads, etc.) were readily available in addition to the staple foods. The bread supply was ample and unrationed. On November 3, almost every housewife I saw out shopping in various Budapest districts carried a live goose, in addition to a

full shopping basket, in preparation for a large Sunday dinner.

All but the food stores remained shut throughout this period, with the exception of a number of tobacconists, who carried ample supplies of cigarettes, tobacco, and matches at the usual prices. No rationing was in effect.

There was a severe gasoline shortage in Budapest, and private vehicles (including those belonging to foreigners) could not obtain gasoline or motor oil unless they persuaded some militia guards to let them have a few liters; this, so far as I know, happened only once, in the case of an Austrian Red Cross passenger car whose gas tank had sprung a leak. In the provinces, the gasoline supply was spotty: some areas had almost none, while others (viz. Györ, Keczkemet, Pecs) had so much that gas stations were permitted to operate quite normally, without rationing and at the usual (quite low) prices.

There apparently was no serious shortage of other fuels (all the hotels and private houses I stayed in or visited seemed well heated), and there was no interruption of the gas supply for cooking and heating. Except where telephone lines had been damaged by the fighting, the phone service in Budapest functioned quite well, and continued to do so even at the peak of fighting during the second Russian occupation.

Public transport in Hungary was non-existent until November 3, when a few streetcars resumed service in Budapest. Similarly, there was no observable rail traffic until that day. Militia trucks, however, had been assigned to provide an emergency service both inside Budapest and in the provinces. This service was highly irregular and completely inadequate. All trucks and passenger cars (except those belonging to diplomats and foreigners) were requisitioned by the militia and revolutionary councils, but motorcycles remained in the hands of private persons, who seemed to use them sparingly.

Medicines, bandages, and other medical equipment were in critically short supply, and Austrian relief shipments were eagerly welcomed. Foodstuffs, blankets, and other supplies also reached Budapest and the various provincial centers on the way (notably Györ and Sopron) in fairly sizable quantities, and their distribution was supervised by militia units and delegates from the revolutionary councils. No charges of black marketeering came to my attention, despite my frequent inquiries.

VII. Expectations About U.S. Aid

There can be no question that the Hungarian revolutionaries had expected sizable U.S. aid in one form or another, and that

they were desperately disappointed that it did not come. There was a bitter feeling that the West was letting them down, coupled with an almost irrational hope that this feeling must surely be mistaken.

An American flag, or an American passport, created a sensation. "When will you come to help us?" or "Surely, you're not going to just ignore us," were the most frequent comments.

Just one example of many: In the evening of November 2, the rumor spread that Russian armored forces had occupied Budapest airport and were holding it. About midnight, a young Hungarian lieutenant who with three men was guarding the Duna Hotel, where I was then staying, suggested that we should take a car and find out for ourselves whether the rumor was true. An Austrian newsman and I took him up on it, and we all piled into my car, leaving just one man to guard the hotel. We drove through the southeastern sections of town, until the houses thinned out and there were stretches of open fields on both sides of the road. A cold drizzle was blurring the outlines of the trees. Suddenly our headlights picked out black, massive shapes astride the highway. They were tanks, bearing red stars, squatting silent and motionless, except for the gun barrels in turrets which slowly swivelled at us.

We stopped and stared for a moment, then reversed and silently drove back into Budapest. In the hotel lobby, the lieutenant gripped my arm and drew me aside.

For what seemed like a full minute, he gazed intently into my eyes. "You've seen them yourself," he finally whispered in German, "and there will be more, many more. Tell me the truth, for God's sake, will your people help us, or do we have to fight all alone, just by ourselves?"

I heard the same sentiments expressed more than a dozen times, and so did every American I knew who was then in Budapest. I know that there wasn't an American newsman in Hungary who did not somehow feel inadequate and a little ashamed.

There was no unanimity among the population as to what forms U.S. aid might take. The simpler people mostly thought in terms of a U.S. ultimatum against the Russians, and of armed American intervention starting with a paratroop division or so. The least anybody expected were military supplies -- chiefly heavy weapons, and specifically anti-tank weapons. "Give us those, and we'll fix every Russian tank which might ever get into Hungary," was the universal comment. None of the people voicing these sentiments seemed to think that there was much of a chance of U.S. aid starting World

War III. The Russians would go home rather than risk another war, was the general opinion.

Among the intellectuals and highly-placed government officials, there was little belief in U.S. armed intervention. "The simple people believe this sort of thing," they kept saying, "but we know better." They did expect, however, that the Polish people would come to their aid in a spontaneous revolt of their own, and possibly the East Germans. They expected little from the Czechs or the other satellites. But the worst blow, of course, was the Big Powers' preoccupation with the Suez crisis. "We expected little help from the West," was the bitter comment, "but we never thought they would stab us in the back!" Most people had thought that the very least the U.S. would do would be to intervene diplomatically with Moscow, threatening renewal of the cold war and a trade embargo unless the Russians left Hungary alone.

I must say that none of the Hungarian expectations of the latter type struck me, or the Westerners I associated with, as unreasonable or exaggerated. All of us were rather shocked at Washington's apparent lack of interest, and somehow we shared the belief that some strong diplomatic moves by the U.S. (even in the face of the Suez developments) stood a very good chance of resulting in a Russian evacuation of Hungary,

especially between October 29 and November 1, when Soviet policy bore all the earmarks of confusion.

I offer these views not as my personal opinion, but as the Hungarian viewpoint, which was apparently shared by most Westerners present, and which, at least at the time, appeared to have a strong logic about it.

That there was widespread disillusionment with the West in general, and the U.S. in particular, there can be no doubt. Whether it will have lasting effects is uncertain. I certainly am convinced that Hungarian hatred of the Russians will outweigh any disappointment with the West. But there is only one country today for which the Hungarians have an almost romantic warmth and affection, and that is Austria. For the Hungarians are an emotional people, and the generous Austrian reaction to their struggle has struck a responsive and grateful chord. If the Hungarians were free to express their opinion and to implement it, an overwhelming majority would quite certainly vote for neutrality and union with Austria.

VIII. Attitudes Toward the Soviet Army

If the Hungarians ever had a respect for the Russian Army (and I think they did in 1945), they don't any longer. They have lived too long with the occupation forces not to

know them intimately -- their strengths and their weaknesses. They do not hate the Russian soldiers, except as symbols of oppression, but they have no liking for them either. The Hungarian citizens are both afraid and contemptuous of the Russians. They think of them as stupid, illiterate yokels -- not really evil, just dumb. Witness the ever recurrent stories (which seem quite believable) that the Russian reinforcements streaming into Hungary in the first week of November kept inquiring whether an Austrian border canal was the Suez Canal, or whether the German army was still holding Budapest, and similar nonsense.

As fighters, the Hungarians think that one of their children is worth five Russians, and this opinion was only reinforced by their revolutionary fighting. They are convinced that, if only they had the equipment, they could lick any army the Russians could send against them. At the same time, they are deeply conscious that they have little or no military equipment to match their opponents.

The Hungarian civilian population adopted one amazingly effective method of dealing with Russian tanks when they were not actively fighting them: they ignored them. They would pass by the tanks without so much as giving them a glance, as though they were parked trucks or

taxis. While the tanks' guns would nervously swivel up and down, people would carry on their business as though the tanks didn't exist: they would distribute handbills, hold meetings, evacuate wounded, move supplies, etc. I cannot help feeling that it must have been highly disconcerting to the Russians, who seemingly did not quite know what to make of the whole thing.

The same method was applied by local Hungarian garrisons to Russian garrisons in Komarom, Szekesfehervar, and a small tank detachment near Sopron. Hungarian and Soviet garrisons would be quartered side by side, but the Hungarians would completely ignore the Russians, as though they did not exist. The Russians in the above-mentioned garrisons were immobilized by lack of gas and supplies, but I actually saw a detachment of five Soviet tanks near Szekesfehervar quietly passed by a number of trucks carrying heavily-armed Hungarian militia-men, with each truck flying a Kossuth flag. This happened on November 4, when hostilities had again commenced, and I can only assume that the Russians were confused. They were also confused by my car, which carried British tags and a British flag to go with them. In any case, I was never held up (the only trap for Western cars after November 2 apparently was on the main road from Budapest

to the West, notably in Komarom and between Gyŏr and Magyarovar). Aside from these blocking units, other Soviet detachments do not appear to have received orders to stop the cars of foreigners: on two occasions I even joined Soviet tank convoys. The troops riding on the tanks (perhaps 10 per tank) generally pointed their rifles and burp-guns at me, and either laughed and waved or scowled. Sooner or later, the tanks would draw up on the right side of the road, and I'd pass them in second gear, blowing my horn. They never gave me any trouble, except once, when the lead tank of a convoy threw his rear astride the highway just after I had passed him. (Lest I be accused of silly, irresponsible heroics, I should like to explain that I was on my way home to my family in Vienna after the reoccupation of Budapest. Driving mainly on secondary roads past Lake Balaton and south of Gyŏr, I managed to cross into Austria south of Sopron, at a border station still held by revolutionaries. The whole thing was a lot less risky, I thought, than staying in Budapest, and even in retrospect I think this was true. I am surprised that none of the Western newsmen in Budapest took a similar route out. Incidentally, I also had some Hungarian refugees in my car.)

The Russian heavy equipment I saw -- mainly tanks, Stalins and T-34's -- was absolutely magnificent. They generally went

along highways in groups of three to ten, at speeds up to 35-40 mph. although they reduced their speed to 25 mph. on concrete roads. (Thinking these speeds rather high, I later had my speedometer checked in Austria, but found it to be quite accurate.) A number of tanks slithered off the highways, at times even on the straightaway, and into the muddy fields, where they got stuck. Another tank apparently was then left behind for company, and the tank crews could be seen squatting in the fields, cooking something in large iron kettles over a little fire.

While the officers and some of the tank crews were well dressed and equipped (many in black uniforms with sheepskin caps), the regular soldiers in khaki were often in deplorable shape. Their ill-fitting coats were filthy and torn, buttons were missing, and they carried rifles slung over the shoulder with pieces of hemp rope.

Most of the troops appeared to be white, but interspersed with them were a few Mongolian faces. I never saw a complete Mongolian unit, though I was told that some existed and were operating in Hungary. To the best of my knowledge, few if any atrocities were committed by them, and (much to everyone's surprise) they had even lost their customary interest in wrist watches.

Although I have not seen this myself, I understand that a number of units deserted to the patriots with their equipment, and that the Hungarians' leaflets asking the Russians to leave them in peace and go home were, in general, quite effective. There were also reports that various Soviet units were fighting each other (Mongolians vs. White Russians, artillery vs. infantry, etc.), but while there undoubtedly was some truth in these rumors, I cannot vouch for their accuracy.

In all, the Soviet army -- or what I saw of it -- looked tough but by no means invincible, and in some instances pathetic. Still, I wouldn't care to fight it armed with a '45. My impression is that the same instructions do not reach all line troops, and that the latter's tendency is not to meddle unnecessarily unless directly instructed to do so. I also think that a Russian army would have a hard time attacking the West through the satellites. The first tank crews knew very little about street-fighting, and paid a heavy price. I think they learned something from the experience, but are still not very adept at this sort of warfare. The Hungarians certainly were a lot more ingenious in their tactical operations, and they knew it well. Given proper arms, they would be more than just a nuisance to the Russians.

IX. General Outlook in View of Popular Attitudes

The Hungarian revolt started as a demonstration of solidarity for the Poles, and assumed its ultimate form and magnitude rather by accident. The original participants had not looked forward to serious trouble (they had previously got away with similar demonstrations). Gerö's AVH, which set off the bloodshed, had wanted to create just a little trouble (according to the best sources) in order to impress the Russians with the continued need for Stalinism.

That the matter got completely out of hand was due to the hot temper of the Hungarians, their old and pent-up frustrations which were reaching an explosion point after months of political relaxation and anti-Stalinist "self-criticism," and the surprising weakness of the repressive organs of the regime and the Soviet occupation forces. This weakness created a vacuum, which was filled by the most liberal and democratic forces in Hungary. I cannot escape the conclusion that these forces, and especially their leaders, were as surprised by their strength as the Communist forces were by their own weakness: after living under secret-police terror for years, the people -- especially in the larger cities -- had little idea how unanimous they were in their detestation of the regime.

During the revolt, and until November 4, the vast majority of the people had to take a stand, and they did so freely for the first time in eight years. They overwhelmingly opted for freedom and a form of multi-party democracy, and even confirmed Communists took a boldly anti-Russian stand. This is the key to an understanding of the continued heroic struggle of the Hungarians after the second Russian occupation, and of their attitudes even now.

On the morning of November 4, the elevator man of the Duna Hotel left his elevator, took a submachine gun from a militiaman, and went into the street to fight. "There's nothing else I can do," he told me. "I've no place to go. I have a wife and three children, but I don't care. I'd rather be dead than live under the Soviets again. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad if we hadn't been free for a week. I just won't go back to jail quietly."

This, I think, about summed up popular feeling. The emotion, the almost religious fervor with which they relished their newfound freedom, goes far toward explaining why the Hungarians fought on against overwhelming odds. Also, they were still expecting Western aid of some sort. Finally, when this hope proved chimerical, they fought on because they preferred to die fighting to perishing in an AVH prison. Also, they realized

that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to send the greater part of the population to prison or to Siberia. Individually, they ran considerable risks even in putting up passive resistance; collectively, they were more powerful than the puppet regime of Kadar (whom they consider on a par with Judas Iscariot or Quisling). Now that they know where their neighbor really stands, they have gained immense confidence in themselves; it will take a great deal of doing to shatter this confidence and to split a unified country once more into mutually suspicious individuals.

I personally doubt that the Hungarians can, in the foreseeable future, work up a similar emotional fervor, and repeat an armed rebellion on the scale of the events of the last few weeks. Only in case of a general war could the West count on a similar performance. At the same time, I doubt that the Hungarians will permit the Kadar regime a long and happy life. Their passive resistance movement is not likely to weaken in the next few months, and they will see to it that the Hungarian satra will bring Moscow no tangible gains but only embarrassment and grief. My own guess is that the Russians will soon try to find a way to repeat the Polish "solution" in Hungary. The only man capable of achieving this is undoubtedly Nagy. Unless he is now unwilling to offer even

this much co-operation to the Russians, I would not be too surprised if he reappeared from the pit to have another try at running Hungary. I have found no Hungarians to share this view -- they don't seem to believe that the Russians would ever permit Nagy another chance. However, the Russians would be wise to do just that. My feeling is that the majority of Hungarians would be willing to live under a fairly liberal, left-wing "Popular Front" regime. Under dictatorial Communism, they will remain a political and economic liability to Moscow.