

György Heltai: Hungary 1953-1956

I. SUBJECT:

The three-year struggle between the Rakosi-clique and a gradually developing national opposition, both within and without the Communist Party. Main factors: the change imposed by Moscow after Stalin's death; premiership of Imre Nagy, his reforms and the sabotage of his program by Rakosi; the impact of the restoration of legality, of the re-opening of the political prisoners' trials, and of the experiences of freed prisoners becoming public knowledge; the expulsion from the party and persecution of Imre Nagy open the eyes of the nation, his popularity becomes firmly established; Rakosi's desperate fight for retaining his power while forced into making concessions; Rakosi ordered by the Russians to resign; his successor, Gero, is being distrusted by the nation; the re-interment of Rajk becomes an occasion for a spontaneous mass demonstration meant against the regime and is a test of strength for the Revolution -- Period covered: December 1952 - October 6, 1956.

II. OUTLINE

- 1.) At the end of 1952, Hungary is in a desperate economic situation; standard of living is at its lowest ebb, police terror at its highest, and the nation is reduced to silence. The Communist leadership begins to feel uneasy as the news of Stalin's critical illness spreads, trying to guess in what direction changes will take place. Rakosi goes to Moscow in December 1952, to explore the situation. On his return, to prepare for all eventuality, he decides to get rid of the most damaging witness of his terror acts, Gabor Peter, and consequently has the entire general staff of the AVH arrested. This was a fatal mistake and the origin of a process of disintegration within the AVH, his most reliable arm.  
pp. 1-2
- 2.) Stalin's death in March 1953 brings no changes in Hungary for a few months. The Rakosi-clique feels securely in power. It is taken completely unawares by being ordered to Moscow in May 1953, together with Imre Nagy whom they had pushed into the background, and President Istvan Dobi. Rakosi and consorts receive sharp criticism for their past government which had led, beside the economic bankruptcy of the country, to the hatred by the Hungarian people not only of socialism, but also of the USSR. At this meeting, the Russians give proof of being well-informed of the Hungarian situation. Their various demands culminate in wanting Imre Nagy to take over as premier.  
pp. 2-3

3.) In June 1953, Imre Nagy presents his program -- popularly referred to as the "June road" -- in the Parliament and later, before the party congress. It contained criticism of the past mistakes and proposals to mend them: various radical economic measures and, most important of all, restoration of the rule of law (legality). The party has no choice but to conform -- ostensibly. The reaction of the people, on the other hand, is an awakening of hope and confidence. Especially after the liquidation of internment camps had been decreed and the revision of political indictments promised, they expect the removal of the exponents of the former leadership. However, the Rakosi-clique does everything to sabotage the program of Imre Nagy and to retain power, trying to prove to the USSR that Nagy is not suited for leadership. They are particularly afraid of the reopening of the political cases and try to delay it. After a year's tergiversations, Nagy turns to Moscow for help. In the meantime, a process of disintegration begins in the middle and lower cadres of the AVH.

pp. 3-9

4.) In May 1954, the official revision of the political cases gets under way. It offers the spectacle of a comedy similar to that of the 1949-50 trials, in reverse. But its impact on public opinion is tremendous; there is general fermentation, people begin to dare to talk. The freed political prisoners, disregarding orders of silence and threats, also talk. They are mostly old-time Communists and heroes of the resistance, consequently their influence on the oldest cadres of the party is significant. Their revelations have the greatest impact on the writers -- whose revolutionary mood goes back to this summer of 1954 -- and the youth. From party rank and file to the masses, everybody realized that they had been misled, betrayed and made party to the crimes committed. The party meetings being the only open forum available, it was there that the rebellion against the old methods and leaders began. In the meantime, the Rakosi-clique clings desperately to its power. In the fall of 1954, Imre Nagy turns again to the Russians for help and gets their support. In October 1954, he lays before the party and the nation the balance of his one-year premiership and touches upon the question of his program being sabotaged. From the party leadership, Gero pretends to take his side; some persons in key positions are suddenly dismissed or transferred -- those of course, who, more or less eagerly, but nevertheless supported Nagy.

pp. 9-12

5.) Meanwhile, Rakosi and consorts undertake a decisive counter-attack. They go to Moscow and accuse Imre Nagy of hurting the Soviet aims with his policy and of developing into a second Tito.

At this particular moment, the old Stalinist line is the strongest in Moscow, Malenkov had been ousted, -- thus Rakosi is successful. In February 1955, the Hungarian leaders are again called to Moscow, Imre Nagy is confronted with Rakosi's accusations and called upon to practice self-criticism. He only admits economic difficulties, but even those mainly due to the legacy and maneuvers of the Rakosi clique. Upon return to Hungary, Rakosi continues to play upon the theme of Nagy's self-criticism, and knowing his popularity, tries to pressure Nagy into compromising himself by publicly admitting that he "had been wrong." But the latter remains firm in his original stand and only offers to resign all his political functions and return to his university chair in order to save the unity of the party. When all this is of no avail, Rakosi plays up Nagy's illness to prove that he is unsuited to any responsible position; the medical communiqués are worded by Rakosi. In desperation, Rakosi resorts to the last drastic step: expulsion of Imre Nagy from the party, destitution from all his honors including the professorship. He thought, he had disposed of the "Imre Nagy issue."

pp. 12-13

- 6.) In reality, it has only begun: Imre Nagy's popularity had diminished during the preceding months, the public did not know what went on behind the scenes and only saw that he could not live up to his promises. They began to suspect him of connivance with the old leadership. With his expulsion from the party and the subsequent personal harassment he was subjected to, the eyes of the nation were opened to the fact that he had to leave his post because he had turned against Rakosi. His popularity became general.

pp. 13-14

- 7.) Having set aside Imre Nagy, Rakosi began to feel secure again. The "unity" of the party was restored -- but in practice it meant that the leadership was unified -- against the party and the nation. He tried to step up again the police terror, but it became impossible to stop the process which had started in 1953-54. In the summer of 1955, criticism becomes more and more open in party meetings, though no names are as yet mentioned. The changes occurring in the Soviet foreign policy, the Yugoslav reconciliation, are mistaken by the Rakosi-clique as being only transitory. But the majority of the party and the entire nation turn against the party leadership and insist on questions such as relations with Yugoslavia and political rehabilitations. Rakosi and company are forced into making concessions, -- always too late and too little. They lose the initiative, the situation in Moscow is not clear either, and a democratization trend makes itself felt from everywhere. The expulsion of Imre Nagy proved another fatal mistake and the campaign officially launched against him provided the best opportunities for criticism levelled against the old leadership. Signs of disintegration show in important

party organs, e.g., the editorial staff of the Szabad Nep, and within the leadership of the party itself. Everybody is afraid for himself and ready to sacrifice the "other fellow."

pp. 14-18

- 8.) During these months, Imre Nagy lived almost isolated. Even visitors were scarce, because the AVH kept watch on them. Eight or ten of his old friends, however, continued to see him and keep him informed, which helped him in writing his memorandum, -- now known all over the world. He was a Communist, he believed in a humanistic socialism and thought that all the wrongs were due to unscrupulous politicians and careerists. Above all, he believed in the possibility of an independent and even neutral Hungary in the shadow of the USSR. But most of his friends went further and recognized the inherent imperfections of the system during their extremely guarded discussions. This closed circle of friends around Imre Nagy had an important influence on the political shaping of the country: each member in turn influenced his own circle of friends, -- they created and directed the Petofi Circle, they set the tone in the Writers' Union, had contacts with university students and professors.

pp. 18-19

- 9.) The party apparatus continues to remain firm; the functionaries are assured that every concession is only tactical and they are used to believing blindly. Also, they cling to their privileged position, they are the aristocracy of the regime. Not even the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party brings about any change in the official Hungarian policy. In fact, just about that time, Rakosi is about to strike down on the writers and artists who a few months earlier had submitted their famous memorandum on the shortcomings of cultural life. However, during the press campaign launched against them, public opinion reacted with indignation against Rakosi. Déry's nation-wide popularity began at that time.

pp. 19-20

- 10.) Rakosi becomes frantic -- nothing can stop the new spirit which spreads across the country: people talk openly, party meetings, the Writers' Union, debates in the Petofi Circle, are more and more stormy with dissatisfaction. The demand for the resignation of Rakosi can be openly heard. The Poznan events cause a momentary setback to the opposition: the Soviet and Hungarian leadership, frightened, attempt new terroristic measures, against the Petofi Circle, Irodalmi Ujsag, the Writers' Union. But the people could not be frightened any more. The name of Gomulka becomes a symbol and Imre Nagy's name is its Hungarian counterpart. The demand ~~is~~ is for democratic socialism.

pp. 20-21



11.) In mid-July, Imre Nagy had his sixtieth birthday. It became an occasion for a national demonstration: the leaders of the country's cultural and scientific life, led by Zoltan Kodaly and including several active politicians, went to his house to pay their respects. The AVH watched from the buildings on the opposite side of the street. Rakosi ordered disciplinary action against all of those who went. A list of about 500 prominent names was prepared and a mass-arrest was frustrated only by an "indiscreet" article published in Borba.

p.22

12.) Rakosi is losing his head in trying to defend his position. His attempts to find "allies" and play out one person against the other, continue. The Yugoslavs don't like the situation in Hungary, Tito refuses to make peace with Rakosi. Suslov and Mikoyan arrive at Budapest on the 18th of July and order Rakosi to resign. But in his place they put the most hated man of the regime, and just as good a servant of Moscow: Gero. Public opinion is not fooled. The Irodalmi Ujsag gives voice to the distrust: the old terror symptoms can be seen behind the promises of the "new" leadership. In this atmosphere came the 6th of October and the re-interment of Rajk. This was the outcome of a long struggle led by Rajk's widow and a few of his friends. The regime wanted to underplay the ceremony by giving it the smallest possible publicity, but the friends of Imre Nagy, as an act of resistance, mobilized within a few hours the workers, writers, journalists and university students of Budapest. For once, the greatest mass demonstration occurred -- spontaneously. It was not only to bury Rajk, the ceremony was a symbol applied against a hated regime. It was a test of strength for the Revolution.

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Translation

MR

By the end of 1952, the country found itself in a desperate economic situation. The failure of the excessive Five-Year Plan became obvious. The greater part of the national income was absorbed by the senseless heavy industry investments, such as the phantom-ironworks of Dunapentele (planned, in view of the lack of raw materials, on Russian iron ore), the Budapest subway, and similar constructions, all serving primarily political purposes. There was a catastrophic decline also in agrarian production. Hungary, formerly an exporter of grain, had to import wheat to meet her own needs. The forced collectivization, the arbitrary re-grouping of farm plots, the compulsory deliveries, etc., stifled the peasantry's ambition to work, and the agrarian standard of the country dropped sharply. The development with regard to real wages was extremely unfavorable. The income of the industrial workers was continuously lowered by continuous norm-contractions, in other words, prescription of always higher fulfillments, and the hidden rise of prices; the material resources of the peasantry were exhausted by means of ruthless tax policy and excessive demands on deliveries.

The population was silent. The number of those in jails and internment camps reached a high point heretofore unparalleled in Hungary, the internal deportations affected tens of thousands. People dared not even grumble, because the informers of the AVH were present everywhere, and even a suspicion of the intention to voice

dissatisfaction was sufficient reason to send a person to jail. Records were kept on practically every single inhabitant of the country and everybody was under constant surveillance. At regular intervals the chiefs of personnel in plants and offices, trade union functionaries, party cadres, block wardens prepared reports on the political attitude and circumstances of life of every person working or living under their "jurisdiction"; all these reports were in the end incorporated in the files of the secret police, the AVH.

The leaders of the country saw more or less clearly the situation and considered the increasing of terror the only way out of the difficulty. In December 1952, a feeling of insecurity began to take hold even of them. In the leading circles it was already known that Stalin is critically ill, and they were trying to figure out from the events of the XIXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, who was most likely to become the dictator's successor. Malenkov's chances seemed to be the most probable. In December 1952, Rákosi left for Moscow to explore the situation. His trip coincided with the arrest of the Jewish physicians of Moscow, and upon his return he immediately proceeded to the preparation of a similar action.

However, on the basis of his observations in Moscow, he was reckoning with some change of direction, and for this reason it was imperative for him to get rid of the star witness of his terror acts, the chief of the AVH, Gábor Péter. Accordingly, he had the entire general staff of the AVH arrested (in Moscow, Abakonov had informed him that Péter and some of his associates had complained against

him with the NKVD).

Rákosi thought that with this measure he had accomplished the consolidation of his power, however, subsequent years proved that he had miscalculated, and actually what it achieved was creating a feeling of insecurity among his best "janissaries."

In March 1953, Stalin died. There were various rumors about the circumstances of his death. One version would have it that he had a stroke in the meeting of the Political Committee because his proposal to resettle the Jews of Russia in Siberia was voted down, another that Beria got him out of the way, that Beria even showed publicly his pleasure over the stricken body of Stalin, etc., etc., -- to know the exact truth behind these gossips was difficult; the fact remained, however, that Stalin had been ill for months and, likewise, the fight among the Soviet leaders for his succession had been going on for months.

Stalin's death had no visible effect on the Hungarian situation during the first months which followed it. The Rákosi clique had the situation firmly in hand.

For this very reason, their surprise was immense when, in the spring of 1953, not only the members of the leading clique, but also Imre Nagy whom they had set aside, and the non-party member president of the state, István Dobi, were all ordered to Moscow. Rákosi sensed that danger was ahead and tried to invalidate the invitations extended to Imre Nagy and to Dobi. But the Russians insisted.

The talks in Moscow took place with the entire Soviet Politburo



present. Main spokesmen on the Russian side were Khrushchev, Beria, and Malenkov. Rakosi and consorts received sharp criticism for the entirety of their governmental activity up to that time and they were told that henceforth party and government leadership were to be separated so as to take out of Rakosi's hands the government of the country not only in appearance but in fact. For this reason Imre Nagy was to be designated prime minister and he was to correct the mistakes of the past.

During these talks the Russians showed a fairly exact knowledge of the situation prevailing in the country and of the people's mood. They laid the responsibility for the mistakes of the economic planning in its entirety <sup>on</sup> ~~in~~ the doorsteps of the Hungarian leaders, asserting that, while ignoring the opinion of the Soviet advisors, they had undertaken impossible tasks. They made no secret of the principal cause which made them worry, ~~namely~~ namely the fact that the policy of the Hungarian Communist leaders provoked the Hungarian people's hatred not only of the Socialist system, but of the USSR itself, <sup>that,</sup> and/had it not been for the support of the Soviet army, the Hungarian regime would have been swept away by the people long ago.

In June, 1953, Imre Nagy announced his government program, later known under the name of the "June road" -- partly in his initial speech before the Parliament, and partly before the Third Congress of the MDP (Hungarian Workers' Party -- Communist).

The tenets of his program were put together by Imre Nagy himself.

The top party and government functionaries were reluctant to assist in an analysis of the mistakes of the past. Imre Nagy drew up his critical comments on the past partly on the basis of data given to him by the Russians, partly with the help of one or two Hungarian economists, but mostly on the basis of his own notes. I do not wish now to go into the details of that program. Essentially it was the admission that, in consequence of the harmful economic policy of the past years, the living standard was stagnant. (Actually even this was a "doctored" pronouncement, since real wages, compared to those of 1949, had decreased by 15 to 20 percent, while the Rákosi clique professed a 30 percent increase of the living standard.) Nagy protested against the forced swelling of the collectivization movement, the compulsory deliveries, the regrouping of farm plots (commassation of land); he announced that through reduction of the heavy industry investments, he wanted to concentrate on the production of consumers' goods and thereby truly raise the living standard; he passed severe judgment on the violations of law committed during the past years and announced the restoration of legality.

The program of Imre Nagy was ostensibly accepted by the party. However, in reality, from the very first days on, it proceeded to sabotage the measures. Every party functionary was afraid of losing his post, every one of them had something on his conscience and they had to reckon with the fact that if Imre Nagy succeeds in carrying out consistently his plans, sooner or later they would be called to account and, at best, they would lose their jobs. More or less

the same situation obtained in the state administration, especially from the point of view of those in more important posts. Despite the fact that the state apparatus had played only a secondary role, functionaries in the leading posts not only executed, but in most cases overdid the orders of the party.

Rákosi was the first to give expression to this mood. A week after Imre Nagy's policy speech in the Parliament, Rákosi publicly undermined the premier's program before the party activists of Great-Budapest. The party apparatus "relaxed." They took notice of the fact that the new prime minister may say whatever he wants to, his government may issue decrees whatever they may be, the true master ~~is~~ of the country, the Secretary General of the Party, will continue to govern.

However, the public sentiment was entirely different. The policy speech of Imre Nagy and his first orders gave rise to hope. There was a nationwide satisfaction with his sharp criticism in respect to heavy industry development, the prospect of raising the production of consumers' goods and, in particular, the announcement concerning the possibility of licenses for individual artisans and for small retail trade, both completely extinguished by the former regime, with a view to refreshing the blood circulation of economic life. ~~Confidence~~  
Confidence was restored to the peasantry on seeing collectivization practices heretofore in vigor stopped, the strict establishment of the voluntary principle, and above all, the possibility of dissolving

the existing collective farms. The easing of compulsory deliveries and a free market for certain agricultural products also increased, within weeks, the buying power of the peasantry.

However, the promise concerning the restoration of legality had by far the greatest effect on public opinion. By one of his first decrees, Imre Nagy ordered the closing of internment camps, -- after many years of suffering, tens of thousands could return to their homes, provided these homes were still in existence; he put a stop to the forced resettlement of certain strata of the bourgeois population, and for those already resettled he granted the freedom of movement. He abolished the so-called "kulak-lists," i.e., the system of discriminating measures against well-to-do peasants. The entire country was impatiently awaiting the outcome of the decreed revision of political trials. In short, the whole nation was expecting the downfall of the Rákosi clique, a decisive change. All this was quite logical, since Imre Nagy's first speech was such a sharp attack on the mistakes committed during the previous years that nobody in his right senses could have thought that those responsible for these mistakes will continue to remain at their posts.

Looking back now at these events from the distance of four years, it is probably not exaggerated to say that the very fact of such an open attack and the disclosure of crimes and errors had brought about the downfall of Imre Nagy. The forces against him had rallied immediately. As we have mentioned it before, everybody was guilty and there was only one way open to them: the oust and



wreck as soon as possible the uncalled-for purifier.

The actual power having remained in the hands of the party apparatus, the counter-action was begun. Rákosi and his whole machinery turned with all their force against Nagy. In public they professed, naturally, the support of the "new course," but in practice they turned it into a mere slogan. They had before their eyes the Soviet example, where the Stalinist clique, also pushed into the background, proceeded in a similar fashion to render the representatives of a more lenient tendency impossible. Nagy had only a few persons on whom to count; one of them was Zoltán Szántó, whom he had ordered back from his post as head of the Hungarian embassy in Paris. (It is characteristic that it took Rákosi several months to comply with his request). Another was Sándor Nográdi, who, if Rákosi would have had his way, would have been arrested at the time of the Rajk affair and who escaped prison only through the intervention of the Russians; also István Kovács who was set aside by Rákosi during the past years, and, in particular, Miklós Vásárhelyi and a few young men, former members of the Populist Colleges.

There were also a few men in the top party and government leadership who stood decided to back Imre Nagy, mostly out of opportunism; for instance, Antal Apró, Árpád Házi, Kálmán Pongrácz, Ferenc Neuzval, Árpád Kiss, etc. (It is characteristic of his supporters that, during the critical time he was to face in 1954-55, with a few exceptions all deserted him.)

Rákosi and his associates came to quickly from the daze of the first few weeks, and in August 1953 it became already apparent that the promise of the "June program" would remain dead letter.

The former leaders remained everywhere in their places or were given even more important assignments. Though Nagy became a member of the Political Committee of the party, that is the actual governing body of the country, his membership only added to his difficulties, because he was always forced to submit to the will of the majority. And the majority, even though they had their own differences among themselves, stood firmly united against the newcomer.

Their motives are easily understandable. During the aforementioned Moscow talks in May, Rákosi had tried to frustrate at any price the premiership of Imre Nagy and his aim was that even though he was to withdraw from the head of the state administration, at least a reliable man should take over. He tried to have accepted all sorts of candidates and he gave up only when Khrushchev, irritated, rebuked him: "Do you think that only a Jew can be a leading politician in Hungary?"

When they saw that they cannot get rid of Imre Nagy, they attempted to prove to the nation and to the Russians that Imre Nagy was unsuited to carry out even his own concepts.

The prevailing economic crisis played into their hands. Under various pretexts they procrastinated with regard to the retrenchment of heavy industry investments. Nagy had no other choice but to draw

on expensive foreign loans. However, hardly anything was left over from these loans for the development of light industry plants, as they had to be used, in the first place, for easing the ever increasing shortage of commodities.

It is true that the initial measures had accomplished much in alleviating the burdens of the peasantry, however, the party and the state apparatus launched a counter-attack and the forcible collectivizations, the arbitrary re-grouping of farm plots continued, with the cooperation of the AVH, of course.

Despite the proclamation of legality, the power of the AVH remained essentially the same, although the feeling of insecurity created by the arrest of Gábor Péter and his associates did not quite subside in its leaders. Ernő Gerő became <sup>the</sup> the new Minister of the Interior. Gerő, as one of the three members of the party's State Security Council, had been the accomplice of Rákosi and of Farkas in perpetrating a long succession of murders and other illegalities. At the same time, he was responsible for the complete bankruptcy of the economic life as the former chief executive of the Hungarian economic affairs and the most devoted executer of the Soviet's economic conceptions. With perfidity, he and some of his collaborators were the ones to pass judgment on the economic mistakes of the previous years, as if they had had no part in them. It devolved on Gerő, as Minister of the Interior, to remedy the illegalities. In this occurrence, too, he remained true to himself.

It was already past him to prevent the closing down of the internment camps, nor could the decree ordering the cessation of internal deportations be withdrawn, so he and his intimates endeavored at least to stop these people from coming back to the capital, which they accomplished by means of various administrative measures.

The punctum saliens of the entire question of legality was, however, the revision of the political trials. Already during the first weeks of his premiership, Imre Nagy had gone through the files of the most important political trials, thus also that of the Rajk-trial, and there was no doubt left in his mind as to what he had always suspected, namely that hundreds of innocent persons were murdered and thousands of them were jailed and still kept in captivity. He demanded from Rákosi the immediate release of those who had survived. Rákosi was reluctant to comply, Gerő took naturally his side, and Nagy was unable to obtain from Gerő even the alleviation of the sort of the prisoners. Rákosi's argument was that the release of the prisoners would be a grave political mistake, because world opinion would brand the Hungarian leaders lunatics or scoundrels if it came to light that they had killed or imprisoned innocent people. Rákosi foresaw it that once the unjustly convicted would be set free, they would talk and soon it would become known that the Hungarian part in organizing the trials had been played by Rákosi himself.

After more than a year's tergiversations, Nagy appealed to



Moscow, complained against Rakosi and Gero, and only thus did he succeed in setting free some of the political prisoners.

It is interesting to note that during the same time a process of disintegration had begun in the middle and lower cadres of the AVH. They saw that the perpetrators of illegalities continue deliberately their activities, and they were afraid that these same men would use them, the AVH, as scape-goats if need there be. Their faith in the party was shaken. Up till now, the Russian advisors and the Hungarian top leaders kept telling them that they were the fist of the party, that everything they did was right because it was done in the interest of the party. Now, this same party, these same leaders were disapproving of those same acts. These AVH subordinates began to wish to be rid of their prisoners, hoping that thereby their involvement would also diminish.

In May 1954, the official revision of the trials got under way. The comedy of the 1949-50 trials was played all over, except that it was played in reverse. In 1949, the order of the party was that "everybody who is arrested is guilty." In 1954, the change which had taken place in the political life was interpreted by the AVH personnel so that everybody who had been put to jail was innocent. (As a matter of fact, this corresponded more or less to the actual situation.) There were, however, among the prisoners some who had been serving ~~their~~ their sentences for four-five years in solitary confinement, entirely cut off from the world and from their fellow-prisoners, even having forgotten how to speak; when they were again transferred

to the political police for review of their cases they were afraid of provocation and renewed tortures and preferred to stick to their original false confessions. There was a succession of tragi-comical scenes when AVH officers and leaders implored one or the other prisoner with a life sentence "to confess at last" his innocence.

The demons broke loose and nobody could order them back.

The process of fermentation began. People began to talk. After five silent years, only timidly at first, and then louder and louder. For the time being, they did not demand anything, they only complained and judged.

The party would have liked to settle the cases of the freed prisoners as quietly as possible. Those who were set free, on the other hand, felt it their duty to talk (even though when they were released each of them had to sign a declaration to the effect that they would mention to nobody what had happened to them, or ~~else~~ else fifteen years of penitentiary awaits them) in order to lay before the eyes of the country and of the world the stupendous bitterness and experiences accumulated during their imprisonment.

These people were, to a large part, old warriors of the Communist and resistance movements, consequently their influence on the old cadres of the party was significant. There were among them others who have kept their faith in an imaginary party and professed that not the system but the viciousness of certain persons was responsible for what had happened. But not even these kept silent.

The direct experiences had the greatest impact on the writers and the youth. The revolutionary mood of the Writers' Union began in the summer of 1954, when writers and poets, after they had travelled over the country, compared their experiences with the disclosures of the freed prisoners.

On the large masses of the population, however, already the bare fact of releasing the defendants ~~as~~ of important trials had an exciting effect. The economic situation, the criminal industrial policy, the senseless investments, the poverty, -- all this became insignificant before the realization of being outraged in their human dignity. During the era of the great trials everybody became party to the witch hunt. The propaganda had been carried to the plants, offices and villages, etc., so that the entire people should demand the extermination or heavy punishment of the traitors, the branding of their families and friends. Under the effect of propaganda, a significant part of the population had <sup>given</sup> more or less credence to the tales of the fabricated trials. Party meetings resembled negro spiritual revivals, where tens of thousands of honest people practiced public self-criticism for having exchanged a handshake with or written a letter to one or another of the "traitors."

The most faithful followers of the regime became its most embittered and clamoring opposition, because in 1954 they found out that they were cheated, that not only the trials, but everything

was built on lies. That the whole business is a lie, that in every respect they were misled -- the sudden realization of all this came to them when they saw those convicted set free.

There was only one public forum available, the party meeting. Encouraged by the example set by Imre Nagy, the party membership began to rebel against the old methods and the old leadership. This was not the mutiny of the functionaries but that of the simple rank and file, and in particular, that of the young intelligentsia of worker-peasant origin.

Rákosi then was right, from his own point of view, in sizing up the consequences of the rehabilitations. The restoration of legality meant a turning point in the life of the nation.

In the fall of 1954, Imre Nagy saw clearly that he is powerless vis-a-vis the Rákosi clique and once more he turned to the Russians for help.

The Russians admitted that he was right. In October, 1954, he laid before the party and the nation the balance of his one-year premiership, in which he also touched upon the question of his program being sabotaged. From the party leadership Gerő pretended to take his side and warned the opponents of the policy of the "June road." With a show of big haste, a few economic leaders were dismissed or transferred as hindering the development of the new economic policy. Of course, they managed to dismiss, under this pretext, the very persons who, though not wholeheartedly, but still to a certain extent,



supported Imre Nagy.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Rákosi and his associates prepared a decisive counterattack. They complained against Imre Nagy in Moscow, stating that by neglecting the development of heavy industry he is turning against the Soviet economic policy, for particular interests he is betraying the unity of the Soviet bloc and is on the way to becoming a Hungarian version of Tito. At this particular time the old Stalinist guard was giving the tone within the Soviet Communist Party, which <sup>dis-</sup>approved of Imre Nagy's activities in Hungary. As in the USSR Malenkov had been ousted for similar reasons, there was no doubt as to the fate of Imre Nagy.

Imre Nagy has never been the active type politician, and to make things worse, he was ailing around that time, and thus entirely at the mercy of his adversaries. While in October 1954 his position had seemed strengthened, only a few months later he was deprived of all of his functions.

In February 1955, the Hungarian leaders were again called to Moscow. Imre Nagy was confronted with the accusations levelled against him by the Rákosi clique and called upon to practice self-criticism. Nagy was willing to admit the difficulties which were mainly economic in nature, but only on the condition of being permitted, at the same time, to expose the mistakes of Rákosi's policy during the past years, as well as the series of political sabotages committed during his premiership. Upon return to Hungary, the

Rákosi clique continued to play off the theme of self-criticism against Nagy, well aware of the stubbornness of its opponent. It would have been important to them to have it declared by Imre Nagy himself that everything he had done was wrong, because that way the question of Imre Nagy's popularity could have been regarded as settled once for all.

However, Imre Nagy was not impressed by either threats or arguments. He remained firm in his original stand, and in the defense of his principles he was willing to resign all his functions. He came to an agreement with Rákosi that, in order to safeguard the unity of the party, he would forego all his political functions and withdraw to his university chair. But even this was not enough for Rákosi, he divested him of his party membership, of his membership in the Academy of Sciences, of his income.

Of course, all this took several months. The Rákosi clique reckoned with Imre Nagy's popularity and strived, above all, to see Imre Nagy compromise himself in the eyes of the nation. When they saw that they ~~could~~ could not succeed, they tried to make use of Imre Nagy's illness to prove that he is a disabled person and consequently unsuited for any responsible position. The chief physician of the party, István Ruzsnyák, university professor and president of the Academy of Sciences, was appointed to act as his attendand physician, and Ruzsnyák issued, one after the other, medical bulletins ~~was~~ worded by Rákosi on the illness of Imre Nagy.

In the meantime they continued relentlessly their pressure on Imre Nagy, and only when all their efforts proved vain did they resort to the last drastic step, total ostracism.

The so-called "April theses" were formulated (Suslov was present at the meeting of the Central Party Committee and drew up himself most of the theses, in the first place those directed against Imre Nagy) and Rákosi and his associates thought that they had disposed of the "Imre Nagy issue."

In reality, it has only begun. Nagy's popularity had undoubtedly diminished during the preceding months. He could not fulfill his promises and the public at large was unaware of the conflict between the party and Nagy. The general opinion was that the Communists had invented yet another clever ruse, Imre Nagy was lulling the people with empty promises and everything would remain the same. Nagy is just another Muscovite -- it was thought -- like the rest of them.

However, Nagy's expulsion from the party and the subsequent personal harassment he was subjected to exposed the policy of the Rákosi clique, and even the simplest of people understood that Nagy had to leave his post because he had turned against Rákosi and, what was regarded to be the same, the Soviet line. Therewith his popularity became general.

Rákosi and his associates did not succeed in doing 1949 over again, the public openly expressed its incredulity, it was not possible to arrange an Imre Nagy trial, though attempts to do so

were made.

Police terror was re-introduced as a counter-measure. As Imre Nagy was maybe the most popular with the peasantry, so were the reprisals directed in the first place against the peasants.

Having set aside Imre Nagy, Rákosi felt secure. The so much emphasized unity of the party was restored. Party unity meant in this case that the leading clique was united -- against [the masses of] the party and the nation. Men who owed their return to public life to Imre Nagy, in the first place István Kovács, also decided to side with Rákosi.

However, it became impossible to stop the process which had started in 1953-54. In the summer of 1955, in party meetings the question of responsibility was raised more and more often, and though for the time being no names were mentioned, the old leaders were called to account for the crimes of the past.

The Rákosi clique mistook the changes occurring in the Soviet foreign policy around this time as being only changes in appearance. ~~THEY GAVE VERY LITTLE PUBLICITY TO THEM AND ALWAYS~~ They gave very little publicity to them and always with the explanation that certain tactical moves are unavoidable in the process of building socialism, the new Soviet-Yugoslav relationship being such a tactical move.

However, this theory found credence ~~ONLY~~ in party functionary circles only. The majority of the party membership and the entire country rejected it.

Throughout the country, the questions of the Yugoslav policy

and of the rehabilitations were being brought up with increasing sharpness. The political prisoners freed in 1954 kept alive the problem of those who were still in prison.

Rakosi and his associates were forced to make concessions also in this respect, they set free, in small groups, the defendants of Social Democratic, Smallholder, and other trials.

The struggle inside the party had crystallized. One of the poles was Rakosi and the host of functionaries, the other the "Rajkists" and the writers rallied around Imre Nagy. The war was on. A political guerilla-warfare began against the party leadership and the organized functionaries. For the time being, only isolated groups or individuals attacked, the bulk of the membership just gave them support. The impression left by the terror did not yet vanish, people were afraid of reprisals, they knew their leaders, they knew Rakosi's immense vanity, his blind self-confidence and his powerful protectors.

However, the initiative had slipped out of the hands of the leadership. The situation in Moscow also was uncertain, from everywhere signs of democratization appeared, they dared not put into action their heretofore never-failing means, and they were forced into making concessions. The concessions only whetted the appetite of their opponents. More and more demands were made, and they were always attacked at their most sensitive spot, namely on the front of legality. The party leadership lagged behind the masses. The measures it took were always too late; it always satisfied demands



only when it was ~~EXPOSED~~ faced with new, much graver ones and, for reasons easily understandable, put off the clarification of the question of responsibility to the very last.

In the final analysis, Imre Nagy's expulsion from the party was oil on the fire, and in party meetings the campaign officially launched against him provided the best opportunity to criticize the mistakes of the party leadership. Rákosi was still not referred to by name, and though his reputation suffered badly, his power was still immense. People saw that he always managed to save his face with the Russians, as far as intrigues were concerned, he outstripped by far all the other leaders of the people's democracies ( an example of this is the part he played in the Slansky trial) and it seemed that ~~even~~ even Tito would accept him, despite the fact that his schemings played a considerable part in the deterioration of Soviet-Yugoslav relations.

Nevertheless, Rákosi was forced into the defensive. He tried to pin the responsibility on Gábor Péter and other AVH leaders who had been arrested two years before, and when he saw that this was not enough, he was willing to sacrifice Mihály Farkas, former Minister of National Defense, leading member of the Political Committee, the No. 2 Communist. Accordingly, General Mihály Farkas, Hungarian Minister of National Defense, was sent to Moscow to military school, --- as it was called in Budapest, Officers' Candidate School. But all this proved too little. Public opinion demanded

full clarification. Rákosi and his associates had completely lost touch with the people, became the victims of their own propaganda, and believed that the Hungarian people was still prepared to tolerate being taken for a fool. At the same time, Rákosi feared that the concessions would lead sooner or later to his downfall. Both in Hungary and in Moscow he kept emphasizing that vis-a-vis the Hungarian people the "kid glove" policy is a mistake, that in his opinion this is a Fascist people and should be treated with a whip. In mid-1955 he could still whiz the whip, ~~xx~~ but could not deal any more blows with it.

The attacks against the regime grew stronger. Signs of disintegration ~~xx~~ were showing even inside some of the important party organs, in the first place among the editorial staff of the Szabad Nép itself. A few leading Communist journalists (Miklós Gimes, Sándor Novobáczky, Tibor Méray, etc.) were either expelled from the party or dismissed from the Szabad Nép, but that did not help any. Cleavages also occurred in the highest circles of party leadership. A so-called centrist group emerged, the adherents of which would have gladly sacrificed even Rákosi just so they could save their own positions. These people tried to win over to their side the rehabilitated victims of the Rajk trial so as to use them as a front from behind which they could present themselves before the masses. But only one or two of the Rajkists (Kádár, Kállai) let themselves be persuaded and even these with certain reservations only. Rákosi

saw the perils hidden in the question of rehabilitations and therefore endeavored to make himself appear as the champion of rehabilitations. Though he dismissed the charge of high treason against Rajk, he maintained the charge of party treason. Later, under pressure, he modified it, first to say that Rajk had committed mistakes against the party, and finally, that his activity was not entirely clear to the party. It took him more than a year to make timid amends to Rajk's memory by referring to him as "comrade" in one of his speeches. (In general, he fled the rehabilitated like fire, Kádár was the only one of them to whom he spoke.)

The party leadership made desperate efforts to save the domestic political situation. They tried to find supporters to their policy in the name of the fetish of the unity of the party. Gerő himself sized up the dangers of the situation and attempted to create with Kádár an anti-Rákosi front. He called in Kádár and explained to him that the main reason of all the troubles was the deficient theoretical formation of Rákosi, to whom not even the fundamental theses of marxism were clear (and thus "the best pupil" of Stalin was turned into a novice in communism), that he was old and senile, discrediting with his attitude the authority of the party, and that the two of them [i.e., Gerő and Kádár] have to join forces to save the situation. Kádár -- whom Rákosi, likewise referring to party unity, had already worked over -- refused the offer, arguing that Rákosi's international authority was still needed, Farkas, on the other hand, should be

brought to trial. This gave a shock to Geró, because he presumed that in this case Farkas would name him first among his accomplices.

Around this time Imre Nagy lived in almost complete solitude; for months he was actually suffering from illness and the Rakosi clique did everything to aggravate his state. After his recovery, despite his nationwide popularity, he found himself isolated. At first even visitors were scarce (the AVH kept watch on them); eight or ten of his friends kept seeing him and with them he discussed the problems created by the events, and the information thus received was a help in writing his memorandum -- now known all over the world. Imre Nagy was a Communist in these times. He believed in a theoretical, humanistic socialism and that such a system would be ~~the~~ the best for ~~the~~ mankind, and in the first place, for Hungary. He saw clearly the immensity of mistakes committed both in the Soviet Union and in Hungary, but he was convinced that all this was attributable to the activity of dishonest politicians and mean careerists, and everything could be corrected and saved if the direction were taken over by honest people. He also believed that there was a genuine change under way in the Soviet Union and that if only the traces of blood left by Stalin's rule could be obliterated, a healthy life could start there also. But above all he believed in the possibility of Hungary's independence and was confident that, in a favorable moment, even the neutrality of the country could be achieved.

His friends did not entirely share his views. No doubt there

were among them some who were still "believers." The majority, however, had recognized that even the starting-points were erroneous, the theory was obsolete, the system was irretrievable. They had realized that a regime which can be kept in power only by means of lies and terror is immoral. Of course, the moment to profess such views aloud had not come yet. Even among themselves, in this exclusive circle of friends, they were hesitant and cautious in bringing up the real problems. Nevertheless, this circle of friends had a great influence on the political development of the entire country. Not only because the Petöfi Circle came into being on their initiative and under their guidance, or because they could influence the spokesmen of the Writers' Union, the most significant Communist writers, the leaders of the university students and even, in certain faculties, some of the more outstanding university professors, -- but because each member of this group of friends had a wide range of acquaintances and through them news and guiding principles could spread, as it were, in a chain-reaction to offices and plants, to the workers, the party and state apparatus, the intelligentsia -- to the entire country.

The party apparatus remained, in spite of all this, firm. There were rebels and malecontents, but they were the exception. At this time, there was greater insecurity even inside the AVH than among the party secretaries. This was understandable, the events had undermined the AVH, its authority was compromised, more people could



see what went on behind the scenes. The party functionaries, on the other hand, lived in the fumes of party propaganda, from time to time the party leadership reassured them that every concession is but tactics, the only correct -- and remunerative -- attitude being the unwavering observance of the prevailing party line. This ~~XXXX~~ stratum was not qualified for anything, they had forgotten even how to think, they were made to forget it; on the other hand, they enjoyed high salaries, exceptional facilities, and formed the aristocracy of the system.

For these reasons, even the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party failed to bring about noticeable changes in the official policy. Khrushchev's famous exposure of Stalin was not published in Hungary. They tried to resist the irresistible and did not realize that the masses saw clearly the example of the neighboring states, in particular that of Poland, where a democratization process of some importance had started inside the party which had an increasing impact on public opinion. The Rákosi clique based its stand on the conviction, probably inspired by their Moscow comrades, that the XXth Congress would soon be followed by a XXIst Congress, where the new policy, both foreign and domestic, would be condemned, Khrushchev and Bulganin and their associates declared traitors, and liquidated in the usual manner.

It is characteristic of the situation that Rákosi tried, almost

concurrently with the Soviet party congress, to intimidate the malecontents with retaliatory measures. A few months previous to the XXth Congress, on the initiative of Sándor Haraszti, Géza Losonczy and Miklós Vasárhelyi, a group of Hungarian writers, journalists, musicians, painters and actors, submitted a memorandum to the Party Committee. Therein they pointed out the shortcomings of cultural life and called upon the party to urgently remedy them. In way of reply, at the end of December 1955, Rákosi ordered a public "pogrom-meeting" at the headquarters of the ironworkers (Vasas Székház), which had also served, at the time, as the scene of the Rajk trial. The meeting was followed up with a press campaign directed in particular against Déry and Háy. The effect was just the opposite of what they had hoped to create. The meeting was attended only by party functionaries who had been ordered there, they did not need <sup>any</sup> convincing. When in the course of the press campaign the public became informed of the existence of the memorandum and the essential parts of its contents, indignation ~~swam~~ <sup>did sweep</sup> over the country -- only that it was against the Rákosi clique. It did not help either that some of the signatories were forced to recant and others were hit by severe party punishments. This gave the start to Déry's nationwide popularity.

Rákosi was frantic. He now ordered the arrest of some journalists who had been circulating jokes and pasquinades about him. But by now even the AVH was treating them with kid gloves and their trial was drowned in outright ridicule.

A breeze of fresh air swept over the country. Every effort of the party functionaries proved futile. People breathed freely again, they began to talk and judge more and more openly, here and there the names of those responsible could be heard, at a party meeting somebody, a young history teacher, flung it in the face of Rákosi that he must resign.

The membership meetings of the Writers' Union became more and more stormy, thousands participated in the debates of the Petőfi Circle, a political mood glowing with fire took hold of the country. It is interesting to note that the revolutionary spirit -- because in the summer of 1956 we can already call it such -- made itself felt primarily in the fields of culture, literature, and moral questions in general. There is no doubt that the economic situation, the low standard of life accounted for much in the general dissatisfaction, this dissatisfaction nevertheless erupted along the paths of the above-mentioned cultural and moral questions.

At the end of June 1956, during the debate on the press sponsored by the Petőfi Circle, an audience of several thousands demanded the ouster of those responsible, first of all, Rákosi, and for the first time openly demonstrated for Imre Nagy. That this mood did not bring significant and favorable results already then must be attributed to the Poznan uprising. The Soviet as well as the Hungarian leadership was frightened by Poznan, and all of a sudden

they tried to adopt strong measures. The Petöfi Circle was dissolved, the public debates were stopped, an attempt was made to re-organize the Irodalmi Ujság which had had a significant influence on the events of the past months, a commissar was imposed on the Writers' Union.

But the people was not frightened. It became generally known that important figures in the Polish party leadership did not judge the Poznan events in the same way as done in the official Soviet or Hungarian declarations. The whole nation looked toward the Poles. The name of Gomulka became a symbol and everywhere it was linked with that of Imre Nagy. Everybody wanted a change and the goal was socialism made democratic.

In mid-July, Imre Nagy had his sixtieth birthday. His friends

MEH arranged a small celebration for the occasion, which developed into a demonstration of national importance. Quite unexpectedly, the leaders of the country's cultural and scientific life, led by Zoltán Kodály, a few active politicians and the leaders of the former members of the Populist Colleges gathered at Imre Nagy's to pay their respects. From the houses across the street, the AVH was taking the pictures of those who came. The following day Rákosi and Gerö kicked up a terrible scandal in the Political Committee and the Cabinet meeting respectively. As it was, Rákosi had been choking with rage for months already, because Imre Nagy was taking a walk every noon in the busiest street of Budapest,

was talking to the passers-by, and this walk-at-noon of his had gradually developed into a kind of ceremony in the capital, a great many people would walk through Váci Street [Budapest's Fifth Avenue] for the sole purpose of being able to see, or possibly talk to, Imre Nagy. Rákosi and Gerő gave orders to their ministers that disciplinary action was to be taken against all state or party functionaries who had been present at Imre Nagy's birthday celebration. The nation was openly amused. Rákosi had a list prepared containing approximately 500 names, mostly of persons belonging to the entourage of Imre Nagy and of discontented journalists, and wanted to have them arrested. His move was frustrated only by an "indiscreet" article published in Borša. Signs of discontent were showing in the Central Party Committee itself. In 1956, especially after the XXth Congress, certain members of the Central Committee took the courage to criticize the old leadership and even Rákosi himself. Márton Horváth, Károly Kiss, Erik Molnár, Kálmán Pongrácz, -- and in the summer of 1956, Kádár himself -- all turned against Rákosi. One of the sharpest attack on him was launched by Zoltán Szántó. Szántó had been a follower of Imre Nagy; then, in 1955, he practiced self-criticism and was rewarded by being appointed ambassador to Warsaw, but under the impact of the Polish events repented and turned back to Imre Nagy.

Rákosi was frightened and loosing his head. He threatened



Kádár to make public that part of a magnetic tape recorded during László Rajk's interrogation where Kádár, in the name of the party, requested from Rajk to accept the accusations brought against him and thereby serving the cause of socialism. (The tape was played back before the entire Central Committee, but the first sentence which said: "I come to you with the request of comrade Rákosi" had been erased.) The immolation of Farkas did not work out. Farkas came back from Moscow, participated in the meeting of the Central Committee, but he declared that if they touch him, he will tell everything and spare nobody. Toward the end of June Rákosi attempted to divert attention from him by means of a new trial of Gábor Péter. But neither promises nor tortures could induce the former leader of the AVH to accept the role of a "scapegoat."

The Yugoslavs were not pleased with the way things were going in Hungary and Tito refused a reconciliation with Rákosi. The cart was about to turn over, the Russians decided to intervene. On July 18, Suslov and Mikoyan arrived at Budapest and, quite simply, ordered Rákosi to resign. The Hungarian Central Committee would have never gone that far, the great majority stood behind Rákosi to the last minute. But, of course, after hearing the Russian decision, they all bit into their former master.

Mikoyan also tried to tame Imre Nagy, telling him that they in Moscow have never thought of having him eliminated from the

leadership, they only wanted to call attention to his mistakes in February 1955, hoping that, in cooperation with Rákosi, after having corrected the mistakes, he would continue on the "June road."

In the place of Rákosi, the Russians put an equally faithful servant of Moscow's interests and the most hated member of the Government. The public did not expect anything good from Gero. They did not think him better than Rákosi in any respect. The writers were the first to give expression to this mood. The Writers' Union periodical, the Irodalmi Ujság, pointed with growing sharpness to the old symptoms of terror hidden behind the promises of the new leadership, the tightening of industrial norms, the drive against individually farming peasants, the delaying of the revision of illegalities.

Such was the situation when October came. On October 4, the official paper of the Hungarian Communists, Szabad Nép, published in a short communique that, on October 6, Laszlo Rajk, who "died a martyr's death" and three of his associates would be re-interred. The well-informed had known for long of the struggle going on for the rehabilitation of Rajk, lead by Rajk's widow and a few of his friends. The procrastinations in connection with the burial, the resistance of the party forced into action Imre Nagy's circle of friends. Within hours, so to speak, the mobilized all the workers, university students, writers and journalists in Budapest. The party had to retreat, particularly in view of the imminent <sup>departure</sup> ~~return~~ of a

delegation led by Gerö to Yugoslavia. The party apparatus made some efforts to curb the masses intent on demonstration, but it failed. In fact, and probably for this reason, a huge mass as never seen before marched, this time spontaneously, to the reinterment. It was not only to bury Rajk, the ceremony was a symbol applied against a hated regime.

This was the test of strength of the October revolution.