

Géza Komoróczy

Violence Must Be Suppressed

Here is my short answer to the question raised in the rapid conference's title "What Was All This About?" 1) On the 17th and 18th of September the riffraff took over the streets; 2) they deluded themselves into thinking that they were staging a revolution and that, through this remake of 1956, they could actually topple the legally elected reigning government, replacing it with a provisional government *à la* February 1917 and thereby restoring to power the "people's Prime Minister", whose return to office was demanded at every oppositional rally since he had lost the 2002 elections, and who himself has been behind these protests, evidently nurturing the same ambition. But it was not just the riffraff that took to the streets on this occasion, gathering in Kossuth Square first, and then moving on to Szabadság Square. Besides the onlookers who were simply curious, the crowd also included a large number of people who were either genuinely unhappy about the planned economic reforms or had, ever since the summer rally at "Bálványos"-Tusnádfürdô, been systematically galvanized into showing intense displeasure with the so-called "lies" of the government, and of the Prime Minister in specific. Nevertheless, it was the riffraff that controlled the streets and the main course of the events. And finally 3) the third feature of the story was the hesitation and the defeatist cowardice displayed by the government, the police and the leftwing and liberal constituency alike.

Although I was not in Budapest during these two days, simply by watching the news on television I was able to see that the spirit of 1956 loomed out of the mood of the masses. In drawing their framework of interpretation, the earliest analysts on the right all focused on the antagonism between revolution and its suppression: they tried to legitimize the right wing's current political interests by rallying around the banner of 1956. But the images and the words were able to conjure up only one element from the events of 1956 with any degree of authenticity: the so-called "Pest kids" who were hurling Molotov cocktails at the Russian tanks. It is very hard to say this only a few days after György Litván's funeral, but professional historiographers, who in other respects reconstructed the events of 1956 in incredible details, and who were able to draw a faithful and balanced picture of the political undercurrents, seem to have fallen

into the trap that the contemporary actors of the revolution had set by inventing various myths about the street fighters and the young freedom fighters. Although with its prosopographical method, László Eörsi's book seems to have been able to stay clear of this trap, the general historical picture has been set – if I am allowed to resort to such an oversimplification – by the rightwing myths of 1956, even when, on more sober considerations, we can safely claim that the dividing line between Imre Nagy and the Pest kids ran much deeper, than the one between the Pest kids and the lynch mob of Köztársaság Square.

We must realize that many revolutions and uprisings have a marked tendency toward imitation. The word *revolution* itself was originally meant to refer to a circular return to an earlier state. The tendency to reenact the past in this case has a simple morphological reason: there are undeniable similarities between the methods used in mass demonstrations and in attempts to overthrow the government, whether initiated from below or from outside. It is the legitimizing power of the precedent. As Petöfi put it, “the history of the French revolution has, for many years now, constituted the almost single item on my reading list: it has been my morning and evening prayer, and my daily bread.” It even led him to cast himself in the role of a revolutionary. In 1846 he wrote this: “(...) I have a recollection/ of being Cassius in Rome,/ Wilhelm Tell in Helvetia,/ and Camille Desmoulins in Paris. / One day I might even become somebody here, too.” He wanted to become one, and so he became one. Brandishing the Kossuth version of Hungary's coat of arms in 1956 was a similar act of imitation. The list of examples could go on.

Historians always draw inspiration from current affairs, when they are searching the unstructured, murky past for a particular topic worth studying, for a single detail to zoom in on. The protesters' evident desire to reenact the past has made it important for me – admittedly – to zoom in on a single element common to the mass demonstrations of old and new: the blatant display of anti-Semitism. The names of a number of public figures thought to be of Jewish descent were read out and posted on the walls on Kossuth Square. As the protesters were leaving the FIDESZ rally on October 23 – or maybe they were heading towards it – some of them started to throw stones at the Dohány Street Synagogue, shouting anti-Semitic slogans and provoking the policemen who lined up in front of the building. These acts were obviously committed by the riffraff elements, who dispersed among the protesters. What we do not know is the percentage of the scum among the protesters, who were willing to act

as a vehicle for this scum and who tolerated their behavior. There is an analogy here with 1956. While the shameful *White Book* compiled by the Kádár regime readily listed the anti-Semitic atrocities (and the leaders of religious communities were quick to condemn them in a manner devised to display their loyalties to the new regime), the history books, which were written in the 1990s to restore the honor of the revolution, chose to gloss over these undeniable transgressions. The only author who has lately revised the source material is Éva Ständeisky. Also, violent acts of anti-Semitism are occasionally mentioned in journalism and memoirs, for example in Rudolf Ungváry's writings. I personally experienced street anti-Semitism in the form of verbal abuse in October 1956. For fifty years I have been unable to explain how historiography could have failed to take note of the fact that the scum had survived after 1944. They reproduced and reappeared on the scene in 1956 and in 2006. The only reason why the events did not develop into worse excesses was that the general direction of the conflict was different now. Nevertheless, a historian cannot fail to point out that similar atrocities were committed in 1848: in the days immediately after March 15, and then again in April, Jews were driven out of the Home Guards, with demands to expel them from the country, too, both in Pest and in Pozsony, as well as in several other towns up and down in the country for weeks to follow. Windows were smashed and traders were looted, accompanied with bloody incidents. In his Petôfi biography, Illyés coyly avoids mentioning these events, regardless of the fact that Petôfi himself wrote harsh words on the subject, and so did Vörösmarty, by the way. In today's historiography, György Spira's authoritative book on 1848, along with a relevant study by Ambrus Miskolczy, has not yet reached the threshold of public thinking. I would like to make one thing very clear: I do not think that the scum could besmirch the good name of 1956. Nevertheless, I am certain that historians should be aware of the ugly and destructive byproducts that accompany the positive developments. I am equally certain that the idea of regarding revolutions as the paradigm of historical change, in the sense that it was developed in the course of the English and French revolutions and was firmly implanted in public thinking by the 1917 revolution, is not viable concept.

At this point I need to address an issue that is directly political. After losing the 2002 elections, the outgoing Prime Minister employed sly methods and cunning schemes, as well as considerable energy, to create a situation in domestic politics, which was analogous to the situation that had existed in Rome in the last decades of the republic,

and especially during the second triumvirate. At that time, in the outbreak of bloody clashes between the polarized forces, only one solution remained: Octavian's decision to turn against his former allies, defeating and eliminating all the other contestants in the battlefield, so as to bring peace to the empire, introducing a balanced and moderate dictatorship, which came to be known as the Augustan golden age.

Although far short of a civil war, the clashes in Budapest were still rather scary. As far as I can ascertain, the authorities failed to react adequately. They lacked the courage to check the mob violence in time. Perhaps they believed that they could ride out the storm without getting dirt on their hands. Now we know that they were wrong. Perhaps they were afraid that the opposition would attack them for acting firmly. Now we know that they have gotten that anyway. The subsequent debate between the police chiefs was not about the things that we could read in the reports and hear in the interviews, i.e. who was in charge at the time and what kinds of weapons and protective gear were issued to the policemen. It is obvious that the police delayed their actions at the television headquarters on political considerations, and perhaps even on political instructions, right until the point when they were no longer in the position to do anything about the situation. The debate between the police chiefs conceals this hesitation by throwing the veil of professional arguments over it.

But I would go even one step further, again not without resorting to any historical reference. I believe that in the present political situation, but perhaps also at a more general level in the existing social milieu, the political philosophy, which I would describe as doctrinaire liberalism, has failed. I would rather not elaborate more on its precise definition. I could characterize it with the words accredited to Jesus: "if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew, 5:39)

At variance with the popular translation of the word *ponérosz*, the Greek text *mé antiszténai tó ponéro* translates into Hungarian as follows: do not resist evil force, do not oppose violence. I believe that in a free society, in the interest of the public good, quite the opposite of this principle should be applied. Violence must be opposed and suppressed. According to a formula invented in the age of Enlightenment, one's personal freedom, the freedom of speech included, ends precisely at the point, where the personal freedom of the other begins. The law, and the guardians of the law, should defend this point without fear.

But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.