

2006(1989)1956

In relation to any historic anniversary, it is not just the historic event concerned, nor some of its honored moments enshrined in the nation's memory, that can shape the framework of its celebration; to a considerable degree, it is also determined by the accumulative history of earlier commemorations. This has definitely been the case with March 15, the day marking the outbreak of the 1848 revolution in Hungary. The volley of shots ordered on March 15, 1860 at the gates of the Kerepesi cemetery, which claimed the life of the law student Géza Forinyák, also sealed it once and for all that the commemoration of the revolution would, despite all efforts to the contrary, mostly belong to the people in the street. (Géza Forinyák's burial on April 4, 1860 was actually turned into one of the greatest anti-Habsburg demonstrations. When his brother, the Deputy Director of the Ludovika Military Academy, died in 1906, he was buried in the same tomb. Cavalry General Gyula Forinyák had served as imperial councilor at the pleasure of the Emperor, the man who had ultimately been responsible for his brother's death.) A similar fate is in store for October 23: the events that took place during the commemoration of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary will most probably play a part in shaping the celebrations in the future. In fact, the process is already in full swing: the protest march, which the right-wing opposition organized on November 4, 2006, was meant to demonstrate solidarity with the victims of the brutal police attack on October 23, 2006, in much the same way that, beginning with 1958, the official celebrations on November 4 under the communist regime commemorated the communist martyrs, who had fallen during the siege of the Party Headquarters in Köztársaság Square on October 30.

By choosing to commemorate the events of October 30 on November 4, the authorities hoped to draw a veil over the true significance of the actual date: that was the day when the Soviets

launched a massive intervention to crush the 1956 revolution. In this way the suppression of the revolution could be presented as a just punishment, delivered swiftly after the commission of the crime.

The most memorable moment in the history of celebrating October 23, and also the event that was most crucial from the viewpoint of future developments, was the reburial of Imre Nagy on June 16, 1989. So direct is the connection between this event and the history of celebrating 1956 that people often think that June 16, 1989 actually took place on October 23. The reburial was the only public act of cathartic experience in the entire period of the democratic transition. But on June 16, 1989 it was not the revolution that people celebrated: what was evoked on that day with unparalleled dramatic power was the betrayal, the execution and the retaliations that followed the crushing of the revolution. And that dramatic quality has continued to accompany the memories of 1956. It is almost like having a dismembered Easter: as if we chose to commemorate only the crucifixion, but not the resurrection. (In the case of the 1956 revolution, the resurrection preceded the crucifixion. The order is reversed in the case of both Pesach and Easter: there the persecution and the suffering were followed by salvation and resurrection.) In the Middle Ages, the translation of the saints' relics, their reburial, was usually accompanied by the announcement, and occasionally even the administration, of absolution and amnesty. But anyone who expected that Imre Nagy's reburial would bring about purgation was to be bitterly disappointed. In the words of Peter Brown, the most prominent historian of Late Antiquity, "**idézet...**"

The only people who believed that Kádár's derangement and death within three weeks of Nagy's reburial would restore normality to the world and dispel the *miasma* of despair, were the ones who had gained a powerful moral experience from reading Sophocles' Oedipus in their childhood. But the great majority still flocked to see Kádár on the catafalque, despite the fact that the previous months had witnessed a

dramatic swing in public opinion about the revolution. According to a poll conducted in late 1988, as many as 40 per cent of the respondents looked upon 1956 as a counter-revolution and more than 55 per cent described Imre Nagy as a counter-revolutionary; by contrast, in a similar poll conducted in the spring of 1989 a mere 12 percent thought of 1956 as a counter-revolution and hardly 10 per cent believed in Imre Nagy's guilt. The regime went under and was buried with the dead, yet it appeared that the recognition and the demonstration of sin had no discernible, cleansing effect and that order was not restored in the world. When we claim – because we have reason to claim – that 1989 had direct links to 1956, we have to accept that June 16, 1989 enriched the memory of the betrayed revolution with a crucially important, new element.

One of the traditional functions of remembrance, which nevertheless has declining importance in our secularized world, is that it allows us to relive the past, by making it both concrete and meaningful. In Jan Assman's words, "the act of remembrance – besides many other of its functions – helps us experience the past as present;" it allows the participants to intervene (at least symbolically) in the present by the temporally and chronologically accurate evocation of a past event. The ritual evening service of the Seder is more than a simple mnemonic exercise; it also helps to relive the event through textual means and bodily gestures. The reason why Christian tradition requires its believers to recite Christ's Passions at Easter is to let them become active participants in the act of Redemption. But a past event can only be relived, and the act of remembrance can only play an actualizing role in this regard, if the event remembered actually forms part of the memorable prehistory (i.e. a prehistory that is worth remembering and reliving) of the present, and also of the aspired future.

1956 could form part of the memorable prehistory of the present only if the link between 1956 and 1989 was apparent and acceptable to

all. As long as such a link is so conspicuously absent, the present can only form the anti-thesis of the betrayed and crushed revolution. But in order to frame an argument, whereby a substantial continuity existed between the revolution and our negotiated political transition that had been based on compromises and left the culprits and their successors in positions of power, one would need to give a tortuously abstract interpretation of the events. And even then, we would only have appealed to the intellect, which is still a far cry from an emotional identification with the idea. What makes it especially difficult for people to accept the existence of such continuity is the knowledge that the prominent members of the present government had, at one time, all worked as secretaries in the young wing of the former Communist party, before they joined its successor party and grew wealthy from their involvement in the privatization of public assets.

If we consider the images burnt into the minds of later generations in connection with 1956 – the siege of the Radio building; the tearing down of Stalin’s statue; the knocking down of red stars; files of personal information burning on the streets; adolescents firing their guns from behind trees; Soviet tanks blown up with Molotov cocktails; dead bodies disinfected with whitewash, lying on the pavement; the besieged Party headquarters on Köztársaság Square; paramedics risking their lives in a hail of bullets, running across the square – and juxtapose them with our observation that celebrating an anniversary is only possible, when the event commemorated clearly forms part of the prehistory of the present, then we shall find the events of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary not so surprising. What we saw in these pictures, as well as in the documentary films and the memorial programs produced in the past couple of months, bear no resemblance to our familiar picture of Petôfi – allegedly – reciting the National Song in front of well-dressed Pest citizens taking cover under their umbrellas and shaking their heads peacefully in 1848; nor do they remind us of the blurry outlines of Biedermeier furniture behind the

thick clouds of tobacco smoke in Pilvax Café; the imagery they conjure up bear greater resemblance to the accusing faces of the people executed after the crushing of the revolution, as their figures loom above the memorial woodcarvings marking Plot 301 in Kerepesi cemetery, with the entire confusing scene enveloped in the autumn mist.

The revolution (and its only rational, normalized history) was lost in the moment when we recovered it. It happened in the moment that our first opportunity to speak publicly about 1956 came, on June 16, 1989. As György Litván expressed it already in 1992: “back in 1989 we thought that our task was going to be to refine the familiar and broadly accepted view of 1956, and to enrich it with the events of local history... We were prepared for scholarly debates, but not for one moment did we expect that the essence of the revolution would be questioned.” Those modulations in the attitude towards the revolution, which took place after 1989, and especially after October 23, 1992, could forecast all the things that happened in 2006 – even though they were actually sparked off by current developments in domestic politics.

In view of the preliminaries, it would be a serious mistake to describe the events of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as inadequate. One of the frequently mentioned alternatives of the events (which the President of the Hungarian Republic alluded to in his ceremonial speech) is the unprecedented national unity, which emerged suddenly in 1956, and which ought to be a historical example to be emulated in the country's current state of tragic national and political division. But the idea of the graceful moment of national unity, as contrasted with the constant haggling among the political elite, is one of the favorite historical myths promoted by populists: a nation standing united, following the single, rational course of action without a moment of hesitation or deliberation. With regard to its possible political consequences, this idea is not necessarily less dangerous, nor less appropriate, than the idea of a revolutionary reprise. If we were asked to draw up an imaginary

choreography of commemoration based on historical and national unity, then it would be a tough call to decide between the two scenarios: the one we have outlined just now would be no less mortifying to watch, than the one we saw recently.

The road to 1989 in Hungarian history originates from October 23, 1956. The road to 1956 in Hungarian historical conscientiousness originates from June 16, 1989. Without understanding 1989, we cannot grasp the meaning of 1956.