

1956: The Hungarian revolution

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In mid-October 1956 students in Szeged marched for the right to form their own organisation independent of party control. They also struck against the compulsory learning of Russian. The students of Budapest's Technological University followed with a demonstration on the 23 October in solidarity with Poland.

The 23 October demonstration was the spark that lit the Hungarian revolution. The government asked the leaders of the Petofi circle, a discussion circle led by members of the Communist Party's youth organisation that had been banned just a few months earlier, to lead the demonstration.

Balazs Nagy (later known as the Trotskyist Michel Vargas) said: "At this time, and subsequently also, the Petofi circle curbed rather than encouraged the movement, considering that the hastening of events could lead to a catastrophe."

From 1953 the leadership of the Hungarian Communist Party was split between Matyas Rakosi, the leader since the Stalinists came to power after the war, and Imre Nagy who wanted to pursue a policy called the New Course, which called for greater spending on consumer goods and would allow farmers to leave the collective farms. This struggle was given added impetus by the death of head of the Soviet Union Stalin and his denunciation by his successor Krushchev in February 1956.

Throughout Eastern Europe, the Stalinists had expropriated capitalism after the war but created regimes that had no workers' democracy and were instead ruled by Stalinist bureaucracies. Under Stalinism workers had been denied democratic rights including the right to strike or to form their own organisations, and faced repression for criticising the regimes. In the factories, members of the party militia and trade unions policed workers, and suppressed any fightback against exploitation.

Krushchev's speech gave the green light to the opposition in Eastern Europe to take to the streets. In June and July 1956, there were a series of strikes in Sepal and Budapest. On 28 July the workers of Poznan, Poland, demonstrated but were brutally fired upon by the internal security forces which killed 54 and wounded at least 300.

In Hungary it erupted again with the student demonstrations of October. "Now or never - Most vagy Soha - became one of the slogans of the uprising. The students presented 16 demands, including "New leadership, new direction, require new leaders!", "We shall not stop halfway - we will destroy Stalinism", and "Worker-peasant power!". The masses also called for Imre Nagy, who had been expelled from the central committee at the beginning of the year, to be reinstated.

The 23 October demonstration moved to the radio station where the crowds wanted their demands broadcasted. There the AVH (secret political police) opened fire on the demonstrators who returned fire from arms provided by fraternising Hungarians troops.

Now Nagy appeared, after refusing to attend the demonstration. His speech to the crowd showed how

alien his bureaucratic outlook was from that of the students and workers. He said: "It is by negotiation in the bosom of the party and by the discussion of problems that we will travel the road that leads toward the settlement of our conflicts. We want to safeguard constitutional order and discipline. The government will not delay in arriving at its decision."

Faced with a massive demonstration, active fraternisation between workers and soldiers, including soviet soldiers, and armed clashes with the AVH, the Stalinists called on Soviet troops to restore order in Budapest and declared martial law. They also called on Nagy to head a new government.

Meanwhile groups of workers were already doing battle with Soviet tanks on the streets of Budapest. Throughout the length and breadth of Hungary, the workers responded to the Soviet intervention with strike action. By 26 October, virtually all work had stopped. Moreover these days saw the formation of workers' councils in every factory and mine and also the link up of those councils into the regional revolutionary committees in major industrial centres, such as Gyor and Miskolc.

The revolutionary committees of Gyor and Miskolc also controlled local radio stations and broadcasted messages of solidarity to the Soviet troops.

Miskolc declared: "Our people did not revolt against you, but for the achievement of legal demands. Our interests are identical. We and you are all fighting together for a better socialist life."

Gyor workers committee addressed soviet soldiers with:

"Soviet soldiers! We the workers from the railroad factory in Gyor inform you that in our democratic state, workers are the guardians of the socialist achievements. That means with all their might, they are speaking out against returning factories and banks to the capitalists. At the same time we are against any Rakosite Stalinist restoration."

These statements were typical of the workers: on the one hand wanting to preserve socialism against the capitalists but also fighting for democratic and political rights against a military clampdown.

In most areas the workers' councils busied themselves with local or factory problems involved in maintaining the general strike and giving critical support to Nagy. The leaders of the movement saw their committees as alternative local government but ceded central political power to Nagy and his reformist faction in the Communist Party.

While the working class base of the party and certain elements of its apparatus went over to the insurrection, its leading circles sought desperately to diffuse the crisis and re-establish bureaucratic rule - behind Soviet tanks.

The repression of the uprising

At the end of October, under the pressure of the masses the Stalinists appointed Imre Nagy as Prime Minister. The country had been brought to a standstill by a general strike. The masses had driven out the hated secret police, the ÁVH, and were demanding the withdrawal of the Soviet troops.

The Soviet troops had been brought in swiftly from western Hungary to crush the uprising, evoking a non-existent clause of the Warsaw Treaty, but the soldiers quickly began fraternising with the locals. They had been in the country for some time and knew far more about the situation than the troops of the second intervention that were rushed in from Rumania. Many Soviet soldiers deserted to the Hungarians.

Each day the papers printed reports from the provinces that showed that the revolt was nationwide. Revolutionary councils were formed in the principle towns: Debrecen, Győr, Magyaróvár, Tatabánya,

Miskolc, and Veszprém. Power was in the workers hands, as well as the railways, which refused to transport Soviet troops and supplies.

The Stalinists frantically tried to regain control as the Soviet intervention was falling apart. Then Nagy played the role he was brought in to play ? to calm the situation, to call an end to the fighting, and to disarm the working class. He announced that the next election would be under the multi-party system; he called on the Soviet troops to withdraw from the capital and promised to begin negotiations for a complete withdrawal from the country. He recognised the organs set up by the revolution and asked for their support.

On 31 October, the fighting ended and the Soviet troops began to leave Budapest. The insurgents were releasing political prisoners ? up to 5,500 were freed. Budapest began to look more like normal ? the buses started running and work was beginning again in the large factories.

Although some budding revolutionary organisations, many formed from ex-members of the Communist Party, warned that the freedom fighters should not to lay down their arms until the demands of the revolution had been fully implemented, after a decade of severe state repression, their organisations were weak and they did not have the influence needed to lead the struggle.

The masses also believed that Nagy could resolve the issue of state power and so the workers? councils refused to challenge him and the Stalinists for political power. The committees saw themselves as potential alternative local government but ceded central political power to Nagy.

At this point the effective power in Hungary was divided between the Nagy government and the armed people themselves, as represented and led by their national committees. It was dual power. But without a political party with a revolutionary programme that laid out in concrete terms the need for revolution, to struggle for power with the Nagy government, to call for ?All Power to the Workers Councils?, to smash the stranglehold of the Stalinist bureaucrats and re-order society, the revolution would stall and eventually fail.

Nagy of course had no intention to resolve the question of power in the hands of the workers. ?My friends, the revolution has been victorious,? he told a mass demonstration in front of the parliament on 31 October. He demobilised the people and lulled them into the belief that the struggle was over. Yet, at that moment, Nagy was in secret negotiations with Russian officers and their troops were already on their way back on the eve of 1 November.

Hungary was important for geo-political reasons, it was an important buffer for the Russians from the West, it was industrialised and had natural resources. But above all, if the they lost control of Hungary then revolutionary movements would spring up across all Soviet Republics, as was seen in Poland earlier in the year. It was necessary to repress the Hungarian uprising before the unravelling began.

On 2 November, the Soviet media launched an all-out attack against Nagy and the ?clique of counter-revolutionaries who had come to power in Hungary?. On 4 November, after the Hungarian delegation had been arrested, the Soviet army launched a surprise attack on Budapest at dawn. Armed resistance was hastily organised but it was powerless to stop the Soviet forces.

Janos Kádár, the first secretary of the central committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers? Party (the re-named Stalinist party) announced that a new government had been formed which has appealed for the Soviet Union for military assistance: ?The Hungarian Government of Revolutionary Workers and Peasants requests the assistance of the Soviet Army Command in helping our nation smash the forces of reaction and restore law and order to the country in the interest of our people, the working class and the peasantry.? Nagy sought political asylum in the Yugoslav embassy.

Despite a general strike and fierce street fighting against superior Soviet armoured units, the Soviet's military intervention was effectively over by 10-11 November. Young workers accounted for 80 to 90 per cent of the wounded, while students represented 3 ? 5 per cent. Nearly 20,000 Hungarians were killed and there was aerial bombardment of the major proletarian strongholds.

The workers tried to prolong the revolution by forming the Central Workers' Council on 14 November, but it was too late ? Stalinists had regained control and the repression began again. Thousands of people were sent to prison and Soviet forced labour camps. Some 2,00 people were executed.

The events of October and November 1956 in Hungary showed the workers' and students' will to fight when they took up arms against two Soviet military interventions. They toppled a hated Stalinist government and smashed the secret police, the ÁVH. They created workers and revolutionary councils that became the real power in every factory and most localities.

The workers organisations and the government were in a struggle for power and a dual power situation developed. The Hungarian revolution showed that without a revolutionary programme -and a political party to fight for it ? the spontaneity of the masses could not develop a strategy to take power and the uprising was crushed.

The tragedy of the Hungarian revolution was that the workers were unable to create a revolutionary leadership and programme of action that could establish a government and take power to defend the political revolution and extend it to the rest of Eastern Europe and the USSR.

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