

János Kádár: the Myths and the Realities

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Crime and Compromise: Janos Kadar and the Politics of Hungary since the Revolution. By William Shawcross. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974. Pp. 311.

The communist system in Hungary went through various phases of change since the 1956 Revolution. From the Soviet armed intervention to the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) and the accompanying liberalization János Kádár stood at the helm of the Party and played a major role in the execution of Imre Nagy as well as in laying the foundations for a more relaxed political atmosphere since 1968. The subject of Mr. Shawcross' book is the analysis of this era and Kadar's personality as they are interrelated. Most students of the Hungarian scene agree that the political and economic system is beset with ambiguities and as Shawcross sees it, so is Kádár's personality. Because of these contradictions, the author's coherent and lucid analysis which sheds light upon the deeper aspects of the system is to be regarded as unusually incisive writing.

Kádár's political profile is tied to his personality development and this is an enlightening approach in the absence of other available evidence. He was born as an illegitimate child, a fatherless and deprived peasant boy, an unskilled laborer who came in contact with Marxism in the factory districts of Budapest, and this early experience with communism and the Party grew into his first permanent identification to which he—above all—remained attached to the present day. However, unlike other communist leaders, he was home-bred and remained forever alien to the Moscow trained party-functionaries. As leader of the underground party with Rajk during the Second World War he appeared to maintain a feeling of community with the worker-class. Kádár is a dedicated communist, not trained in the Soviet Union and this paradox may explain some of the contradictions in his political life.

The author chooses Kádár's personal life as a point of departure in each area of the Hungarian milieu examined in this volume. Kadar's early childhood took place in the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy and in Trianon Hungary. Unfortunately, the treatment of the Hungarian history before 1945 is perhaps the weakest part of Shawcross' work and is in sharp contrast with his analysis of post-war years. While he exhibits keen judgement in the latter, his understanding of the former is superficial and the reader is left in the dark regarding his sources. Not to include Bethlen and his consolidation is inaccurate and the view that all economic problems were caused by an insensitive government along with the fact that he disregards the impact of the Trianon Treaty is in serious error. To say that Hungarians in general felt "nothing but admiration and gratitude for Hitler" (p. 45) is untenable position in the light of historical data.

Shawcross puts the post-fifty-six trends into better perspective by tracing the analysis back to Stalinism and the Rákosi-regime. However, the real strength of the work lies in the discussion of the post-revolutionary and current events. There is no question that Kádár had a decisive role in shaping the political and economic institutions, yet he depended on Soviet approval which he could not and would not forsake.

In this reviewer's opinion the centrally significant reforms took place in the economic sphere. While not much is mentioned about the repressive agricultural collectivization, the permissive New Economic Mechanism receives perceptive treatment. The decentralization of planning and the expanded enterprize autonomy stand in the focus of the reform, which creates stronger individual incentives through premium distribution to increase productivity. In terms of overall economic activity and standard of living, the NEM was a considerable success. For a better understanding of the magnitude of these reforms, the author should have given more details regarding premium inequities, strengthening group conflicts and the functioning of economic regulators. It also appears that Shawcross overlooks the fact that not all economic indicators improved evenly and, more importantly, one of the key objectives of the reform, the increased productivity, remained unfulfilled.

While the NEM registered dramatic successes in some areas, it also triggered negative results in the socialist society. The spreading "petit bourgeoisie" tendencies, moon-lighting, profiteering, excessive preoccupation with material acquisitions became wide-spread

phenomena in the entire society including the Party. The "New Hungarian Man" is the "money grubber." These phenomena created even some restlessness and dissatisfaction among the worker-class and party leaders as well as sociologists who saw a growing threat to the socialist system. It was inevitable that together with economic decentralization, some political power had to be transferred from government to management, but some influence inadvertently slipped from the hands of the party leadership, thus an increasing erosion of party power was noticeable on the middle and lower levels of government and party hierarchy. As Shawcross ably points out, the Party's influence decreases in proportion to the increase in living standards and the Party eventually will have to face the dilemma (p. 198).

While the economic reforms were far-reaching, the political institutions remained more static; yet the atmosphere under Kádár's leadership changed markedly. The new alliance policy is far removed from the former terror and was expressed by Kádár in this formula: "Whoever is not against us, is with us" (p. 105). Both the "crime" and the "compromise" are Kádár's policies and express his seemingly paradoxical stance in the various crises of his life. Shawcross sheds light on this: Kádár will always adhere to Marxism-Leninism and the Soviet Union, but within these limits will search for a more human face for socialism in Hungary. Part of this new approach gained expression in the modified election laws which made the nomination of opposition candidates in the electoral districts possible. However, all candidates represent the Patriotic People's Front's platform and must be approved by the National Election Committee. Shawcross observes these limitations clearly (pp. 101-102) yet surprisingly he falls into the frequent error of Western observers and sees significant reform where there is only tokenism.

More importantly, the "socialist legality" improved and the power of the political police has been curbed. There are still political trials and detention camps on a reduced scale, but there is great improvement in comparison to the Rakosi era and the late fifties. As Shawcross stresses, the regime is based primarily not on suppression but on suasion and "society is ruled by a collective will, not by . . . a dictator or a group of self-appointed oligarchs" (p. 103). The first part of author's judgement is correct: suasion is more often used than terror but he stretches the point too far by stating that "collective will" is the ruling force and fails to define what he means.

The lighter atmosphere of the alliance policy filtered into numerous areas of the life in varying degrees. Preliminary censorship

was abolished and writers enjoy a latitude of expression unknown before but basic criticism is not tolerated by the informal yet effective party control and "much of the most important news is not reported in the Hungarian media" (p. 169). Kádár's friend George Aczél was in charge of the cultural affairs at the time of the writing and he followed a balanced "anti-revisionist and anti-dogmatist" policy. Within these limits, courting official tolerance, a "commercialization of cultural products" emerged under the NEM conditions. Shawcross brings the problem into sharp focus by stating that the new libertarianism generated serious concern by the left-wing "sectarians" and gave rise to a threat by petit bourgeois and anti-socialist tendencies. As George Lukács expressed it, NEM's emphasis on profit-making had drastically cheapened cultural life (p. 157). However the new Hungarian film-makers did not think so, and similarly to the progressive literary traditions of the past, some film-producers play an avante-guard role in social criticism, but their work became increasingly suspect and restrictive measures have been applied. The limits of the communication freedom are expressed by Pál Ipper, chief radio commentator, quoted by author: "the press should not be used against the general interest of the nation's development simply for the sake of informing the public" (p. 164).

Not much is written by author about the status of the academic disciplines and scholarship. This is regrettable because these questions are of paramount significance in any society. The official position stresses that Marxism-Leninism is the sole theoretical foundation of all sciences yet there is a healthy fermentation and wider intercourse with Western developments, but not freedom from restrictions. Shawcross gives an enlightening account of the story of Sociology and the demise of the "anti-party Hegedus group", expelled from the Party in 1973 because of criticism of the NEM.

One of the more serious problems for the Party is the change in social mobility. While there was a strong upward trend from peasant and worker-class members in the forties and fifties, this slowed down recently. Worker-class children have a declining enrollment and a high ratio of erosion at the universities. Shawcross attributes this to the commanding advantage of old and new middle-class students but fails to mention artificially the admission and retention of worker-class students on all levels.

Kádár's more human socialism began to attack the severe housing shortages yet not all problems are solved. The author makes excellent connections between tight housing, falling birthrate, desire for

material acquisitions and the spreading family problems. Since the time of the writing, a series of government measures, supporting larger families succeeded and the number of live births has increased significantly.

The Party faces a major problem of becoming older—the average age of membership increased to forty-four. Kádár recognized the problem and lowered the party admission age from twenty-one to eighteen but the youth shows lack of interest in joining the Party. Apathy and cynicism, noticeable everywhere in today's youth, is particularly strong in Hungary and the prevailing political emotion is indifference and skepticism toward ideology. This raises formidable questions to the political leadership in the long run—who is going to be the vanguard of socialist construction without dedicated party members? The Party tries to correct the situation through organized efforts by the KISZ and strengthening ideological indoctrination in the schools but according to author the results are meager. The question is particularly thorny in light of the fact that “tolerance of their own Communist party had led few Hungarians to tolerance of the Soviet Union: Russians are disliked more intensely in Hungary than they have ever been” (p. 230). Although this appears to be somewhat exaggerated, knowledgeable observers agree that there is deep resentment against the USSR and the youth is no exception.

Mr. Shawcross draws unusually accurate picture of the major trends and the prevailing mood in Hungary but occasionally he is in error. There is no reason to doubt the present improvements but too frequent comparisons to the darkest years of the Rákosi era distort the picture. However, the author perceives correctly the ambiguity of the situation in the '70's; while the attainment of socialism remained the theoretical aim of the Party, the economic and political evolution moved away from this objective. This is the Party's major dilemma as Shawcross posits it, will there be a crossroad where the Party either has to stop or reverse the direction of the reforms (p. 288)? Events since the writing proved that indeed the Party was aware of the crisis and undertook serious steps to stem the tide of change. The 1974 Central Committee decisions, the 11th Party Congress in 1975, and various government decrees subsequently abandoned part of the NEM and set into motion an economic recentralization and somewhat tighter political controls. The new measures probably do not represent decisive changes yet they are significant departures from the NEM era. As in the past since 1956, once again Kádár remained at the helm of political power, and reformed his reform. Who then is Kádár?

Shawcross portrays Kádár as a dedicated communist who has a genuine concern for the interests of the working people. This commitment to ideology is tempered with pragmatism yet he is above all faithful to the Party and regards dependency on Russia not only a matter of reality but also indispensable to the survival of communism in Hungary (pp. 248-49).

A more complete assessment of Kádár's moral views could be formulated through a fuller knowledge of his motives in the four major crises of his life: the Rajk-case, the 1956 Revolution, Imre Nagy's execution and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. In none of these situations is there a clear explanation as to his role according to Shawcross and any conclusions therefore are largely conjectural. There was certain complicity in the Rajk case, however Kádár's motives are uncertain and the Dubcek case seems to be less important because Kádár probably had no real input regarding the invasion decision. The two other incidents are more beclouded with mystery. Kádár's changing sides between the first and fourth of November 1956, could be explained in various ways. Whatever the reasons, it seems to be clear and this has been the predominant view in Western analyses that the Soviet invasion did not hinge upon Kádár's willingness to form a government but upon the vital political considerations of the Soviet leadership; had Kádár not been available, someone else would have played the role. Therefore, it could be reasonably argued—as Shawcross does—that Kádár's intentions under the circumstances were not all objectionable if he felt that in the long-run he could win the approval of both the Russians and at least to some extent that of the Hungarians. The same pragmatic considerations could apply in Nagy's execution, but author points out that none of these may exonerate Kádár from his ultimate moral responsibility.

Shawcross' central point is that Kádár, through his skillful reform policies became acceptable and commands confidence as he has an understanding of the national mind (p. 287) This reviewer feels that his view is somewhat unrealistic as there may be a difference between "confidence" and tolerance. My experience in Hungary convinced me that Kádár enjoys a modicum of support, a situation of *quid pro quo*; he is respected for his accomplishments and people fear a change. Nevertheless to many he is merely the "lesser evil" who can work out the best accommodation with the Russians. However realistic this sentiment may be, it emerges as the predominant feeling. Kádár's moral responsibility in his four crises is definitely not the focus of

concern in NEM's pragmatic atmosphere. His absolution would not be acceptable in the West and his culpability is rejected by many in Hungary and probably by all in the Party. The answer will be rendered only by History's future judgement if and when the necessary documentation will be released from the hitherto secret files of the Party and Kádár.

Mr. Shawcross' book makes exciting and interesting reading, and irrespective of some of its shortcomings it is certainly one of the best books which has been recently published about contemporary Hungary and its controversial leader, Kádár.

Book Reviews

A History of Middle Europe: From the Earliest Times to the Age of the World Wars by Leslie Charles Tihany (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976, pp. 280, \$16.50).

Ktéma es—what Thucydides said about his history is also applicable to this book. It is a possession for all time. Especially for Hungarians, with St. László on the cover and a Hungaro-centered comparative history of the peoples inhabiting the Baltic-Adriatic-Black Sea triangle between the covers. There has never been such a book; the closest to it was Halecki's *Borderlands* (1952), which was lexico-graphic, Polish-centered, and used Henrik Marczali's book of the 1890's as the most recent German-language source for Hungarian history. Tihany's new book is based on the latest available research in twelve languages. It is the work of a great historian, Hungarian-born and *non-engagé*, trained in the best American universities, and employed for nearly 30 years by the diplomatic service of the United States. Tihany knows history not only from studying it but also from participating in its making. He writes that beautiful, clear, and enthralling English which—as G.B. Shaw said in *Pygmalion*—only Hungarians are capable of using as an idiom.

Tihany's thesis asserts that history ran different courses for the descendants of the Cro-Magnon man in the coastal and landlocked areas of Europe because (1) the peoples of the latter were prey to an unceasing succession of expansionist empires (Roman, Byzantine, Carolingian, Holy Roman, Ottoman, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov); and (2) the states they formed were barred from participation in world trade for lack of maritime outlets, except for the 14th-century period of the "Monarchy of the Three Seas" constructed by the political genius of the Hungarian Anjous.

The book is full of unforgettable vignettes. The Hungarians riding as conquerors through the ghost town of Aquincum; and as conquered, a millennium later, losing most of their country to their neighbors. We see Koppány's quartered body nailed to four city gates; diver Kund sinking the German fleet at Pozsony; Andrew II