

The First War Between Socialist States: Military Aspects of the Hungarian Revolution*

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Academic journals usually publish research papers or new interpretations based on fresh evidence that challenge established concepts. Such articles are the result of painstaking scholarly endeavors. This essay is not one of these, but on certain occasions it seems fitting for an eyewitness to an historical event to relate his experiences and views. In the present case the occasion is a twentieth anniversary and the author was an eyewitness.

As the title indicates, the author's contention is that the Hungarian events of 1956 constituted a revolution as well as a war waged by one socialist state against another. "Socialist" is used here in the Soviet sense; "Bolshevik" or "Soviet" would have done as well. Furthermore, using "socialist" in this sense by no means implies any sort of endorsement. Who, after all, could endorse a system that was introduced into East Central Europe almost without exception by force, and to which the genuine popular responses have included the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the ill-starred Czechoslovak attempt of 1968 to create communism with a human countenance? The socialism that could be successfully implemented with the consent of the governed in East Central Europe or anywhere else in Western civilization would have to be pluralistic, humane, participatory, and democratic. Soviet socialism has none of these ingredients.

The Hungarian struggle in the fall of 1956 has been called a revolution, a revolt, and an uprising. In East Central Europe itself, if mentioning it cannot be avoided, they either say "the events of 1956" or they use the derogatory term, "counterrevolution."¹ It was in fact a revolution in the proper sense of the word: force was unintentionally used by those demanding change, and quite intentionally, the old regime was replaced

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with a new one. After October 28, following the declaration of an armistice,² Imre Nagy's government held undisputed power in Hungary, and no other force could offer any meaningful challenge to its authority. Revolutions are domestic affairs; as such, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a success. What crushed it was not a domestic force but an international one; the revolutionary regime was destroyed by international war.

International war is the massive application of armed might between states, prosecuted systematically in order to destroy an opponent's will or means to fight. The purpose of war is the achievement of certain objectives, such as the acquisition of territory, the imposition of a religion or ideology, or the securing of economic and/or other advantages. When Soviet forces invaded Budapest at dawn on October 24, 1956, and began their indiscriminate destruction, they were interfering directly in Hungary's internal affairs. It is possible that Ernő Gerő, the First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, had consented to the intervention; it is likewise possible that it was he who advocated intervention, and he might even have begged for immediate armed protection. Whichever was the case, the Soviet invasion still need not have amounted to war. As in Berlin in 1953 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the intention and hope might have been to use a show of force to intimidate the Hungarians into reestablishing the Soviet type of socialism and a regime loyal to the Soviet Union. However, when the Soviet invasion was put back in motion on November 1, 1956, when the airports were gradually occupied, and massive armored columns were marching on Budapest, when an iron ring of armor had been forged around the capital by November 3, and when the Soviet artillery opened fire on the night of November 3–4, first on Kiskunhalas and then all over the country, it was obvious that the Soviet socialist great power had premeditatedly launched a major offensive of arms against socialist Hungary. This military operation was executed systematically in order to smash Hungary's armed forces and to shatter the nation's will to resist. The Soviet government evidently intended to reimpose its own brand of socialism through the regime it installed in Hungary—and it did so. Soviet political and military actions exactly met the preconditions of war. There is no shadow of doubt in the author's mind that after November 1, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was at war with socialist Hungary. November 1 is the date of the invasion and the start of the war; but the shooting did not commence till November 4. The Soviet Union has the dubious distinction of being

the first socialist state in history to make war on another socialist country.

General Sergey M. Shtemenko, the late chief of staff of the Warsaw Pact forces, wrote in the weekly *Za Rubezhom* in May, 1976, on the twenty-first anniversary of the conclusion of the pact: “. . . measures are taken for the suppression of counter-revolutionary and aggressive action against Socialist countries. Thus, for example, in 1968 the states of the Socialist community provided fraternal assistance to the Czechoslovak people in defense of the Socialist achievement against encroachments by internal counter-revolution and international reaction.”³ General Shtemenko thus made the Warsaw Pact’s real mission quite clear: to maintain socialism of the Soviet type and to quash dissidence. To those in the know, it was a statement of the obvious. Two facets of the statement are particularly interesting: that it seemed necessary at that moment to give the policy publicity in the Soviet Union, and that, while it was possible to mention the bloodless intervention in Czechoslovakia, the sanguinary suppression of the Hungarian revolution was still a nonevent.

It is also a nonevent even in the West, as was recently shown by a controversial statement by Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s chief political adviser. His widely criticized comment that the nations of East Central Europe should look for organic links with the Soviet Union was strange enough, but far more repellent was Sonnenfeldt’s conclusion: “We should especially disabuse them [the East Central European nations] of any notion that our interest in their relative independence is greater than their own and therefore they have a free ride.”⁴ It is very odd that after the Hungarian revolution, Poland’s “spring in October” of 1956, and the Czechoslovak attempt at “communism with a human countenance” in 1968, it should be assumed that these nations are looking for a “free ride.”

The Hungarian revolution may be a nonevent in the West but in the East it is far more so. There it is neither spoken of nor written about, but it is not really forgotten. It lives on in the subconscious and the conscience. In time of crisis, when realities have to be faced, the specter of it reemerges, as it recently happened in Peking. After Chou En-lai’s funeral, the people of Peking demonstrated against the totalitarian regime and precipitated a serious crisis. The image of the Hungarian revolution flashed immediately into the Chinese leaders’ minds. A resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, published on April 7, 1976, noted: “In the past few days these elements . . . have lauded Teng Hsiao-ping and attempted to nominate him for

the role of [Imre] Nagy, the chieftain [*sic*] of the counterrevolutionary incident in Hungary.”⁵ The ghost of the Hungarian revolution had appeared once again.

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The Hungarian People's Army was a thoroughly socialist force by 1956.⁶ It was the last of Hungary's central institutions to have been transformed. The legislative, executive and judicial branches of government had been “socialized” by 1948, but not the military. Until then there had been no need for a Hungarian army, which might even have posed a threat to the country's totalitarian transformation. Accordingly, as in other countries under Soviet control, the army was reduced to its bare bones. Its traditional role in the “defence” of the country was filled by Soviet occupation forces. But in September of 1948 the socialization of the Hungarian army was started and was pushed forward rapidly, more rapidly indeed than had been the case with the civilian branches of government. By the time Lieutenant General György Pálffy, the inspector general of the army, was executed in September 1949, the process was complete.

The socialist transformation of the army and its concomitant and equally speedy reorganization, rearmament, and expansion, were prompted by the eruption of the crisis in Yugoslav-Soviet relations. On March 18, 1948, the Soviet military and technical advisers departed Belgrade and on June 28 Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform. Hungary, which was already the Soviet Union's obedient ally under Mátyás Rákosi, was now in the forefront of the ideological, political, and military confrontation between the U.S.S.R. and Yugoslavia. As a result, the neglected Hungarian armed forces suddenly became a key factor. What happened between September 1948 and the summer of 1949 to some extent resembled the socialization of the civilian government, and to some extent had a character of its own related to the specific nature of the military. The socialist transformation of the military included the replacement of the supreme command with party leaders (Politburo member Mihály Farkas became Minister of Defense and Central Committee member Sándor Nógrády, his first deputy), reorganization of political control in the Soviet style, including introduction of the *politruk* system through which political officers became co-commanders of troops, gradual substitution of party officials for professional middle-ranking and junior commanders, training many party cadres in Hungary and the U.S.S.R. for professional military

posts, massive anti-Yugoslav propaganda, introduction of Soviet military doctrine and regulations, rearmament with Soviet weapons and equipment, retooling Hungarian industry to manufacture Soviet types of arms and weapons, and the integration of Hungary into Soviet war plans. All this was carried out under the watchful gaze of an ever-expanding network of Soviet advisers.

While the army was being refashioned, its integration into Soviet plans for a war against Yugoslavia was also started. The first such strategic plans had been completed before the Rajk trials of 1949. They were revised and adjusted annually to keep pace with the army's increase in strength. The Hungarian army's role in these Soviet strategic plans was simple: it was to provide the first wave in a Soviet offensive against Yugoslavia. The Hungarian army was to attack between the Danube and Tisza rivers, break through the Yugoslav frontier defenses, advance to Novi Sad, cross the Danube, and occupy the Fruska Gora hills to create a bridgehead south of the Danube. From this bridgehead Soviet forces were to overrun Belgrade itself. Rumanian, Bulgarian, and Albanian forces were assigned similar missions in their respective sectors. Where the Polish and Czechoslovak forces were to be thrown in, the Hungarian general staff did not receive information.

The last two major events in the socialist transformation and rapid expansion of the Hungarian army were the replacement of the supreme war command of the field forces, and the purge of the strategic leadership, both of which took place in 1950. The supreme war command of the Hungarian field forces was tendered to the commander of the infantry (land forces), a post that I filled. In March, however, the position of commander of the infantry was abolished and the minister of defense, Colonel General Farkas, took over. I was transferred to command the War (General Staff) Academy. The transfer was actually a blessing in disguise because in June all the generals who started their career in the old army and were still in strategic positions were purged (Generals László Sólyom, chief of the general staff; Gusztáv Illy, chief of personnel; István Beleznyay, commander of the First Army Corps; Kálmán Révay, commander of the Armored Troops; György Pórrffy, commander of the Artillery; Surgeon General Gusztav Merényi-Scholtz; and Colonel Sándor Lőrinc, the general staff's chief finance officer). All of them were supplanted by party cadres with inadequate professional training. By that time the Soviet advisers were completely familiar with the Hungarian environment and would have provided the professional leadership. The new Hungarian "commanders" would simply have signed the advisers' orders. All that was needed to start the war was the signal.

When the Korean war broke out, the East Central European armies were poised to strike against Yugoslavia. Had the United States and the United Nations not resisted in the Far East preventing the conquest of South Korea, war would have broken out in the Balkans. The United Nations resistance in Korea made it seem likely that an attack on Yugoslavia would also have been resisted and Stalin was not ready to run that risk. Western action in the Far East averted an offensive against Yugoslavia by its socialist fellow states.

The preparedness of the armies of East Central Europe was at its peak during the years 1950 and 1951, and after then it gradually declined. Once war with Yugoslavia was no longer a feasibility, large armed forces in the satellite countries lost their *raison d'être*. The strength of the Hungarian army, like that of its East Central European peers, was substantially reduced between 1951 and 1956. Further troops cuts were planned for 1956 and some were carried out. A disproportionately large number of trained professional officers faced transfer to civilian jobs. Because many of them lacked civilian skills, they were confronted with the prospect of becoming handymen, mechanics, or collective farmworkers. As a result, morale sagged. The officer corps was also afflicted by widespread discontent with Soviet control and domestic despotism. Highly demoralized, many of them turned toward the reformers under Imre Nagy who had already begun to criticize the regime openly, at first hesitantly, then with increasing boldness.

Looking back from a distance of twenty years, I can perceive four noteworthy basic military factors in the Revolution: the loyalty of the troops, the revolutionary government's power and control over the armed forces, the military strategy, and Imre Nagy's last command.

In a conventional war, the fighting man's loyalty to the government is crucial; in a revolutionary upheaval, it is the decisive factor. In a revolution the old regime has a good chance to survive if it retains the standing army's support. If the army is neutral, the chance of success is more slender. Without the army's support, the old regime will collapse almost as a rule, provided the revolution remains a domestic affair. In 1956 the Hungarian armed forces, except the Secret Police, stayed neutral for only the first few hours. At the start of Soviet intervention, however, they began to throw in their lot with the revolutionaries. The Secret Police was neutralized fairly quickly, and within a few days the Stalinist regime found itself with no support other than the armed backing of Soviet troops. The massive desertion of the armed forces, that is, of young people under arms to whom the regime had promised a glittering future, was proof of the dramatic failure of Soviet-style socialism in Hungary.

A regime under attack by the masses can be saved by a substantial group of key officers even if the rank and file of the army are ready to join the revolutionaries. In the Hungary of 1956 numerous upper-echelon officers remained loyal to the Stalinist regime and acted cohesively enough to cause the Imre Nagy government considerable difficulties. A new military leadership devoted to the new government was badly needed—not only new men but a new structure too. The new organization that was established was the Revolutionary Council for National Defence (*Forradalmi Karhatalmi Bizottság*). I happened to draft the decree creating the council, which Imre Nagy promulgated on the government's behalf.⁷ I was elected its chairman, jointly with General Paul Maléter.⁸ A screening committee was formed, charged with bringing back into the armed forces officers unjustly purged since 1948. Its first meeting was slated for November 4, 1956.

Meanwhile, freedom fighters, workers' guards and other paramilitary groups were being consolidated into a National Guard, into which were also absorbed those army units that joined them during the fighting. The National Guard was thus becoming a genuine armed force of the revolutionary government. The main purpose of these revolutionary forces and commands was to preserve public peace and order and to forestall any armed disturbance—a tall order in view of the number of weapons in the hands of young people. Internal order was the key to survival, for any lengthy anarchy would have been seized upon by the Soviet government as a pretext for intervention. Domestic tranquility was in fact secured. On the night of October 28–29, for instance, there had been 28 armed affrays in Budapest; there was not one during the night of November 2–3. By the day before the Soviet incursion flared into armed hostilities, the country was ready to consolidate its gains and pursue its peaceful evolution toward a democratic socialist state and society.

The question of revolutionary strategy was fairly straightforward, for the Imre Nagy government had no plan for war with the Soviet Union, not even a defensive one. Only a shallow defense perimeter was established around Budapest, more for observation purposes than as a lasting shield. In the event of an attack, this line would have secured a few hours' or at most a few days' delay to give the government time for political decisions. This was the context of Nagy's last command.

During the night of November 3–4, the advancing Soviet columns opened fire on the garrison at Kiskunhalas. I at once relayed this information to Imre Nagy, with whom I had a direct telephone line. My reports became more and more frequent as the Soviet onslaught en-

gulfed us. When the outer defense line of Budapest came under attack in several sectors, I suggested to Imre Nagy that either he or I should go on the air to inform the troops that a state of war existed. This seemed essential, since for days they had been instructed very explicitly not to fire on the Soviet troops except as a very last resort in order not to afford them any excuse to interfere in our domestic affairs. Now our troops needed a dramatic order that everything had changed: they must open fire. Wire communications with our troops were inadequate, so that the radio was the only means to inform them that the Soviet Union was openly at war with us.

Imre Nagy reminded me that such a decision was a political rather than a military one and forbade me to make any radio announcement. I replied that I was aware of the political nature of the announcement and that was why I had not gone straight on the air but had asked him to make the decision. Nagy told me that Soviet Ambassador Andropov was at his elbow and had assured him that the Soviet government did not want war and that all that was happening was the result of a misunderstanding. The telephone was not picked up in Moscow, of course, when Nagy had tried to contact the Soviet government. It is an open question whether Nagy really believed Andropov. Clearly, however, Nagy wanted no war, not even a defensive one.

In the early morning hours the Soviet armored columns reached my headquarters but, instead of attacking, they turned toward the Parliament building where Nagy had his office. I reported this to him and he responded: "Thank you. I don't need any more reports." It was a strange order for the commander-in-chief of the freedom-fighters at the height of the Soviet attack. A few minutes later Imre Nagy's voice came over Budapest radio. The prime minister declared that the Soviet troops were attacking Hungary with the obvious intention of overthrowing the legal government. He concluded: "Our troops are in combat."⁹

An apparently irreconcilable contradiction existed between Nagy telling me he wanted no more reports and his telling the nation that our troops were at war. Why did Nagy hedge? Apparently, he wanted no further reports from me because he would have been expected to issue commands in response, and he did not wish to give the order to fight. The memory of Budapest in ruins after the Soviet siege at the end of World War II was still too vivid. A fight against Soviet power would have been futile. "Our troops are in combat," he had said. That was neither an encouragement to fight nor advice to surrender. In Hungary's history there had been surrenders when troops had laid down their arms in good faith only to be cruelly brutalized later. He could not urge the

freedom fighters to accept such a fate. I had advised him that we could still fly him abroad a few hours before the Soviet troops reached the heart of Budapest; he did not want to flee. He wanted to stay among his people. At the height of the war waged by the socialist Soviet Union against socialist Hungary, he made no decisions. He left the decisions to the individual freedom fighter and the judgment to history. He would not denounce the revolution. Instead he remained true to its ideas and goals and to those who participated in it and settled for martyrdom.

NOTES

1. See the title of the "White Books" of the Kádár regime: *Ellenforradalmi erők a magyar októberi eseményekben* [Counterrevolutionary Forces in the Hungarian October Events] Budapest, no date [1957].
2. The armistice was announced by Prime Minister Imre Nagy on Radio Budapest at 1:20 p.m., October 28. *A Magyar Forradalom és Szabadságharc a Hazai Rádióadások Tükrében* [The Hungarian Revolution and Freedom-fight Reflected in Domestic Broadcasts]. New York, no date [1957], p. 98.
3. *New York Times*, May 8, 1976.
4. *Ibid.*, April 6, 1976.
5. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1976.
6. The most recent account is Peter Gosztony, *Zur Geschichte der europäischen Volksarmeen*. Bonn-Bad Godesberg, 1976, p. 125-188.
7. A facsimile of the document is in *Ellenforradalmi erők. . .*, p. 7.
8. *A Magyar Forradalom. . .*, p. 212.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 362.