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HUNGARY 1989: RENUNCIATION OF POWER AND POWER-SHARING

To some degree the course taken by the events in Hungary in 1989 was similar to that in the other communist countries, but it was also different. The similarities need no explanation. The differences do. They were based on two elements. First, Hungary was the only country in the Eastern bloc where self-liberation, as a major factor, included an important historical feature: rehabilitating the 1956 Hungarian revolution.¹ Second, Hungary made a significant contribution to the unification of Germany by dismantling the Iron Curtain and opening its border for citizens of the German Democratic Republic. This Hungarian decision marked the beginning of the GDR's collapse and helped end the Cold War.

The latter difference, the opening of the border, was made possible only within the framework of the political events in 1989 and was only one part of the process of transformation that took place in Hungary that year. In contrast, the impact of the 1956 Hungarian revolution had already left a profound mark on the country for four decades and thus, indeed, the history of 1989 started in Hungary in 1956. Therefore, before dealing with the period of transformation we must take a short look at the revolution and, specifically, at its aftermath.

The experience of the revolution was in many respects characteristic of a number of moments in Hungarian history. Resistance against foreign rulers, the use of force even in desperate situations and against mighty enemies, and the fight for independence are all components of the Hungarian historical heritage. In this respect, the movement in 1956 stood in a direct line with the revolution of 1848–49.

The popular uprising of 1956 is indisputably well documented. The Budapest Institute for the Study of the History of the Revolution has done the most thorough work in this area. Above all, the Institute's yearbooks should be mentioned, which contain articles about relevant new releases as well as the general research situation. A summit in this research was undoubtedly reached in 1996 on the oc-

¹ Czechoslovakia also had to rehabilitate a historic event, the "Prague Spring." But in contrast to Hungary's reassessment of its popular uprising, this rehabilitation did not occur at the beginning of the "Velvet Revolution"; unlike in Hungary, it was not a catalyst for the events nor did it even speed them up. In 1989 Prague, the ideas of 1968, again in contrast to the case in Hungary, were no longer popular, just as in 1989 Alexander Dubček played only a minor role. In other words: the "Prague Spring" was not a constituent part of the "Velvet Revolution." In contrast, in 1989 Hungary consciously referred to the 1956 rebellion and its ideas: the earlier demands for independence, rule of law and a multiparty system.

casation of the fortieth anniversary of the uprising. A number of Soviet documents that had become available as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union five years earlier enabled new insights to be gained. These findings were presented at a multi-day conference held by the Institute, in which Russian historians also participated. The corresponding contributions can be found in the *Yearbook 1996–97*.

The scholarly output on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary was much more modest, which implies that research on this topic had reached a certain saturation point. This probably also explains why several researchers at the Institute have focused on the Kádár era as their object of study.²

In addition to political, sociological and economic aspects, studies in Hungary on the Kádár era have mainly focused on the person János Kádár. This is not surprising, since Kádár stood at the tip of the power pyramid for over thirty years and shaped an epoch. Above all, his transformation is startling: from a hated puppet and the cruel executor of Moscow at the beginning of his career, to becoming the respected and sometimes even popular puritanical father of his country. Given this development, it can be said that in the twentieth century Kádár was one of Hungary's most enigmatic figures.³

Most of the works mentioned in this study are entirely or partly devoted to the change of system in 1989–90. They will not be mentioned individually here, but it should nonetheless be noted that their bibliographies also contain relevant

² The director of the Institute, historian János M. Rainer, has published a biography of Imre Nagy, also available in German, and a collection of essays on various aspects of the period until 1989, including work on the development of the conditions that led to the events of 1989: János M. Rainer, *Ötvenhat után* (Budapest: 1956-os Intezet, 2003). In a book published in 2008, Rainer has also examined the early Kádár era. By examining intelligence archival materials he traces the spying conducted from 1957 to 1989 on József Antall, the first freely elected prime minister after 1989: János M. Rainer, *Jelentések hálójában* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2008). Another researcher at the Institute who is particularly interested in the international context has published a collection of studies dealing with the postwar period, from the rise and seizure of power of the communist party until the collapse of single-party state: Csaba Békés, *Európából Európába. Magyarország konfliktusok keresztjében, 1945–1990* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2004). The last essay in the volume examines the international background of the 1989 changes in East-Central Europe. Békés' bibliography contains a long list of references to thematically related works in Hungarian, Russian and English.

³ There is also no lack of popular scholarly literature. Noteworthy, however, is the two-volume biography by Tibor Huszár, *Kádár János politikai életrajza* (Budapest: Szabadtér Kiadó and Kossuth Kiadó, 2001–03). A picture of Kádár that is scarcely known by the general population is found in László Varga, *Kádár János bírái előtt* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2006). With the help of a large number of contemporary documents contained in an appendix to this volume, the progression through the years 1949–56 of the ruthless, power-hungry Kádár can be seen: playing an evil role at the show trial of László Rajk, then he himself being sentenced in a court farce to life imprisonment by his comrades, and then after his early release from prison his prompt return to the party to continue his march to the top.

material.⁴ The memoirs of some of the politicians who played a role in the system changes in 1989 have been published.⁵

Material about the recent past in Hungary and documents relating to the communist state period and its end are currently—not exclusively, but mainly—accessible in two places: at the National Archives and the Historical Archives of the State Security Services, both in Budapest. The law that governs these archives obliges public authorities and institutions to transfer their records to the relevant archives after no more than fifteen years. In the last two decades the law has often remained unobserved. For example, when in 2005–07 the author of this study was doing research on the political and diplomatic circumstances under which the western border of Hungary was opened for East German refugees in September 1989, he received special permission from the prime minister's office to see the minutes of the 1989 ministerial meetings. These documents should have been stored at the National Archives by the end of 2004.

In 2012, all of the applicable files of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were available at the National Archives. But since some stocks are still closed, not everything is accessible. Nonetheless, at least in recent years there have been a number of cases in which ministerial experts have been granted access to material before the stipulated opening date. The same is true of the documents in the prime minister's office. Also the minutes of the Council of Ministers from 1989 are now available. With a few exceptions, for which access is expected soon, the entire inventory of the existing files of the ruling communist party up to 1989 is accessible.

In 1993 the National Archives published in two large volumes containing the minutes of the meetings held in 1989 by the Party's Central Committee. Another useful volume contains the minutes of the discussions between Hungarian

⁴ In addition to those listed, two more books deal with the process leading to the dissolution of the single-party state: Zoltán Ripp, *Rendszerváltás Magyarországon 1987-1990* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2006) and Ignác Romsics: *Volt egyszer egy rendszerváltás* (Budapest: Rubicon-Ház, 2003); German: *Es war einmal: Ungarns Aufbruch zur Demokratie* (Herne: Gabriele Schäfer, 2006). The first volume (2006) is primarily analytical; the second, published in 2003, contains a chronological presentation of the facts together with a brief commentary.

⁵ Gyula Horn, *Cölöpök* (Budapest: Zenit Könyvek, 1991), German: *Freiheit, die ich meine* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1991). From a scholarly-historical perspective, particularly Horn's remarks about the year 1989 must carry a number of question marks. In addition to the volume already mentioned, Imre Pozsgay published a second book of memoirs: *Koronatanú és tettestárs* (Budapest: Korona Kaidó, 1998). Political memoirs focusing on the 1989 upheaval were published in 1994 by the then minister of justice: Kálmán Kulcsár, *Két világ között. Rendszerváltás Magyarországon 1988-1990* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994), German: *Systemwechsel in Ungarn 1988–1990* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1997). Rezső Nyers was member of the leadership of the communist party, and in 1968 was considered one of the creators of the Hungarian economic reform. His memoirs were published in interview form in 2004: Huszár Tibor, *Beszélgetések Nyers Rezsővel* ([Budapest]: Kossuth, [2004]).

officials and the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, found in the Soviet and Hungarian Party archives.⁶

Finally, there is a problem concerning the documents of the Ministry of the Interior from the period before 1989. In Hungarian professional circles, there is proof that during the transition period from late 1989 to early 1990, this ministry destroyed large numbers of files; it is thus today not possible to aim for completeness. In addition to this, until today only one part—and that, a very modest part—of the files of the communist secret services in Hungary are accessible, especially due to the rigid refusal of the post-1990 political elite. Twenty-two years after the democratic fresh start, a complete disclosure of the lists of agents and informants of the former State Security is still an unresolved issue. This puts a burden on public life and leads to many unproven suspicions. But individual historians continue to meticulously examine material held in the Historical Archives of the Secret Police and spectacular revelations appear regularly in the media.⁷

In view of this situation, if we ask what is needed in connection with the topic at hand, the answer is easy. And the need is very modest, at least from the scholarly point of view. Here we do not need several new works, a single one will do. Of course for this—and this is not such modest request—the government would have to release all of the records from the last years of the single-party state. On this basis, a comprehensive study could then be written with a title along the lines of: *The Role of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior and its Executors at the Turn of 1989–90*.

Defeat and compromise

After fierce battles, the occupation power—Soviet troops—crushed the 1956 uprising, with about 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet soldiers losing their lives. By 1958, more than 14,000 people had been imprisoned and 229 executed.⁸ The Soviet victory was absolute. The ruling communist Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party, now under the leadership of János Kádár, could be re-established in pow-

⁶ László Soós, ed., *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei*, 2 vols. (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1993); Magdolna Baráth and János M. Rainer, eds., *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai magyar vezetőkkel : dokumentumok az egykori SZKP és MSZMP archívumaiból 1985–1991* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2000).

⁷ Quite a lot of attention has been given to a comprehensive study written by two such specialists, despite the fact that of necessity it only presents examples: Gábor Tabajdi and Krisztián Ungváry, *Elhallgatott múlt. A pártállam és a belügy 1956–1990* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2008). In a similar manner a stir was recently caused by the two-volume work: Tamás Szőnyei, *Titkos írás—Állambiztonsági szolgálat és irodalmi élet, 1956–1990* (Budapest: Noran Könyvesház, 2012).

⁸ For the Hungarian revolution in figures, see András B. Hegedűs, Tibor Beck, Pál Germuska, eds., *1956 kézikönyve*, vol. 3: Péter Kende and Attila Szakolczai, *Megtörtés és emlékezés* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996), 303–12.

er, and any reference to the events in the autumn of 1956 henceforth had to use the term “counterrevolution.” Nonetheless, the Hungarian experience also had a positive aspect. From the late 1960s it became evident that the resistance had paid a political dividend. The desperate use of force had made an impression on the Soviet side. After 1956 the Kremlin treated Hungary noticeably more carefully than it did its other satellite countries. In these circumstances, economic reforms became possible; small private enterprises in the services field and private entrepreneurship in agriculture were slowly introduced, despite this going against the communist dogma.⁹ With a sort of dry humor, Hungarians gave this period the later well-known name “goulash communism.”

Perhaps of greater importance than Hungary’s relative economic wellbeing (albeit at the cost of a rapidly growing foreign debt, as will be examined below) was the easing of the political atmosphere. From the late 1960s the Kádár era, which lasted from 1956 to 1988–89, remains in the memory of the majority of the population in Hungary as a relatively tolerable, paternalistic dictatorship. And though it offered little, the minimalist welfare state nonetheless guaranteed a basic social security. Half a century later, the memory is rather faded of the first phase of Kádár’s consolidation rule, whose terrorist methods only ended in 1962–63, especially with the comprehensive (but not absolute) amnesty for the convicted participants of the uprising. After this, political trials were gradually discontinued, and the party leadership stopped requiring celebrations and loud confessions of loyalty. The first passports for travelling to the West were issued in the spring of 1961, although the procedure was long associated with lengthy and often humiliating inspections. Trips to the West for whole families then became generally possible in the 1970s, and from 1 January 1988 Hungarian citizens were entitled to permanently possess a passport valid for all countries. Cultural life became richer from the late 1960s. The borders were gradually opened for Western books, artists and scientists. While the party continued to keep everyday life under control, it was now a sort of soft dictatorship, a silent compromise between the regime and the populace, not true totalitarian rule. Again with the same dry humor touched with bitterness, Hungarians described their country as “the most joyful barrack in the camp.”¹⁰

The party, however, failed in its attempts to annihilate the revolution in everybody’s memory. The country was silent, but the events of October and November 1956 remained an unsettled matter between the leadership and the people. Kádár, who was a mild dictator, might have acquired a certain popularity had it not been clear that the specific Hungarian situation in the 1970s and 80s was not due to

⁹ Endre Antal, “Land- und Forstwirtschaft,” in Klaus-Detlev Grothusen, ed., *Südosteuropa-Handbuch: Ungarn* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 355–82.

¹⁰ On “goulash communism” and the “socialist consumer society,” see Roger Gough, *A Good Comrade: János Kádár. Communism and Hungary* (London: Tauris, 2006), 150–61; Árpád von Klimó: *Ungarn seit 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 152–57.

any unexpected humanitarian kindness of his regime. A better explanation for the “liberal” way Hungary was treated could be found in the anxiety of the Hungarian communists: They remembered 1956 and had learned their lesson during the revolution. They were convinced that a repetition of the revolution should be avoided at all costs.

Transition through negotiation

This reform period—roughly seen, the last twenty years of communist rule before its collapse in 1989—gave Hungary a better starting position for reconstructing a pluralistic democracy and a market economy. The changes that Hungary underwent did not happen as brutally and suddenly, from one day to the next, as they did in the other Soviet satellite states. The contrast was especially striking between the behavior of the party leaders in those countries and the Hungarian politicians. Gustav Husák and Miloš Jakeš in Prague and Erich Honecker in East Berlin tried to maintain orthodox forms of communist power until the last minute, as did, clearly, the Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in Bucharest. The majority of the Hungarian post-Kádarian leadership acted differently. While the transition to a pluralistic democracy in Hungary was a result of the general circumstances in Europe, the economic failure of the regime and, within this framework, popular pressure and the activities of the newly organized opposition, to an important extent, transformation also occurred with the collaboration of reform-minded communists. Many were wise enough to realize that their time was over. Thus they gave way, accepted negotiations about the instating of democratic institutions, and stepped down peacefully when their party lost the first free elections in the spring of 1990.¹¹

It was thus the ruling elite who opened the Hungarian-Austrian border. The decision in February 1989 to create a crack in the Iron Curtain was taken by the Politburo of the party. In the following weeks, power gradually moved from the Politburo into the hands of the government. Consequently, it was Prime Minister Miklós Németh who accepted responsibility for the Hungarian authorities giving permission, in late August, to East German refugees on Hungarian soil to leave for Austria, thus enabling them to continue on to the Federal Republic.¹²

Which significant events preceded the big shift of 1989? One might look anywhere in the chronology, for instance 1985. This was the year that Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Moscow. In the same year parliamentary and communal elections took place in Hungary. For the first time since 1947 and according to a

¹¹ Rudolf L. Tökés, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution: Economic Reform, Social Change and Political Succession*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 305–56.

¹² Andreas Oplatka, *Der erste Riss in der Mauer. September 1989—Ungarn öffnet die Grenze* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 2009), esp. 170–84.

law passed by the Hungarian Parliament in 1983, the nomination of more than one candidate was obligatory. True, the attempts of oppositional groups to present their own candidates were prevented by the powers of the state. But despite of this sabotage, 10.5 percent of all candidates elected in June 1985 were supposedly independent. In the same month, a first general meeting of the various oppositional organizations took place. The delegates from these groups, at that time still united, debated the economic decline and presented their propositions for correction. State authorities did not prosecute the participants.

A year later, in 1986, the behavior of the authorities had changed. On 15 March, the anniversary of the outbreak of the liberal revolution in 1848, police in Budapest brutally attacked a demonstration of oppositional groups trying to conduct private celebrations. In the same year, the cultural journal *Tiszatáj* was not allowed to publish for six months. The reason was a reference that had been made to the “revolution” of 1956. However, in October the association of Hungarian writers revolted against this decision after a vote taken at its general assembly: All Stalinist figures were expelled from the association’s presiding committee.

In 1987 several articles on economic reform appeared, some in official journals and others in illegal yet tolerated publications. Their authors—reform-minded economists—criticized the communist system severely and presented counter-propositions. Nonetheless, in the political sections of their analyses, even the most radical opponents of communism still declared that changes had to take place within the framework of the existing balance of power. For them, as they supposed in their “sober and realistic” manner, pluralistic democracy was but a dream.

Facts and actions, however, did not correspond to this pessimistic attitude. The Hungarian Democratic Forum was founded already in September 1987, and the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) followed a year later, as did the resurrection of the traditional Party of Smallholders. These political parties were finally granted a legal basis only after 1989. When they were founded, still under the communist-ruled state, they were considered movements. For their founding they used a strange loophole that existed due to negligence on the part of the state powers: Paragraph 65 of the Hungarian Constitution guaranteed the right to form organizations, adding that this would be regulated by law. This law was however never adopted.

Kádár steps down

The long-term rule of János Kádár came to an end in May 1988. He lost his position, or rather was overthrown, within the communist party itself. In Budapest a month later, the first mass demonstration of the opposition that had the blessing of the authorities took place: a protest rally against Ceaușescu’s plans to destroy six to

seven thousand villages in Romania, which presented a particular risk to the Hungarian minority and their still-cohesive settlements. This was the largest demonstration that had taken place in Budapest since the days of the revolution of 1956.

Politically, the year 1989 was introduced by Imre Pozsgay, who belonged to the Politburo of the ruling party. Since the mid-1980s he had distinguished himself as the leading reformist politician of the country. In an interview on Hungarian radio at the end of January, Pozsgay referred to the opinion of a commission of historians and stated that it was not a counterrevolution that had taken place in 1956, but a popular uprising. The legitimacy of communist rule was thus openly questioned. Two weeks later, the Central Committee of the communist party accepted the introduction of pluralistic democracy. Of course this meant the recognition of other political parties. It remained, however, uncertain when elections were to be held. Indeed, we have good reason to believe that many functionaries, above all Károly Grósz, the leader of the communist party at the time, still had strong mental reservations. In their minds, an arrangement had to be found that allowed the communist party to remain in power.¹³

On 15 March 1989—again the day commemorating the 1848 revolution—more than 100,000 people demonstrated in Budapest for political rights. Three months later, on 16 June, more than 200,000 persons gathered on Budapest's Heroes' Square to attend a funeral celebration. The mortal remains of Imre Nagy, the prime minister in the revolutionary government of 1956 who had been executed in 1958, were reburied. From 13 June until 18 September, following the example of Poland, round table negotiations were held between the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party and the oppositional parties. The subjects that were discussed included power sharing, preparation for elections, and the modification of the constitution. On 10 September, the government of Németh, as already mentioned, opened Hungary's western border for citizens of the German Democratic Republic to pass. On 23 October—the day the uprising of 1956 had started—Hungary was proclaimed a republic, replacing the Soviet term "people's republic." At the end of the same month, a new election law took effect. And on 1 January 1990, the newly created Constitutional Court began its activities. The elections in April 1990, which were entirely free, were won by József Antall's Democratic Forum. Antall formed a coalition government in which the former communists, now the Socialist Party, did not participate.

Economic decline and debt

This brief overview of the main events taking place in the years leading up to 1989¹⁴ needs to be augmented with some remarks on particular background elements. Today, it is common for Hungarian politicians from all parties to declare that

¹³ Tökés, *Negotiated revolution*, 301–3.

¹⁴ Ignác Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 361–98.

the 1956 revolution found its perfect fulfillment in 1989. Indeed, there is more truth to this statement than most speakers realize. Despite its defeat, the revolution, as we have seen, never ceased to influence the fate of the country. In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, Hungarians had to thank the street-fighters of 1956 for the better treatment given to the entire country. Indeed, in 1956 the Hungarian communists had learned their lesson—respect for their own people. Also the Kremlin recognized that in this country they could not expect the same material and political conditions to be accepted as did the population of the Soviet Union. As described above, in these years there was an easing of the planned economy and a petit bourgeoisie was established, which while modest had a certain degree of well-being. Kádár's policies were directed by the conviction that the living standards of the "working people," as low as they may have been, had to improve from year to year. The deep social dissatisfaction of the early 1950s was not to return and lead to a similar outburst of violence. However from the late 1970s, when the prices for crude oil and raw materials rose steeply and the terms of trade worsened for the communist countries, Hungary was no longer able to maintain Kádár's political guidelines.

The solution chosen by the Hungarian authorities consisted in borrowing money on the Western market. Living standards were henceforth maintained through foreign loans, but the country's debt grew dramatically. State bankruptcy could only be avoided in 1982 by Hungary joining the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Indeed, this was a courageous step, since Moscow disliked the IMF and called it an instrument of Western imperialists. The conditions imposed on Hungary by the IMF seemed to bring some improvement, but already two years later, in the spring of 1984, Kádár spoke out against the measures being enforced to cut expenses. In spite of continued borrowing, the regime was unable to stem the worsening of living conditions. Németh, who became prime minister in November 1988 and was therefore one of the leading figures during the transition period of 1989–90, was at this time a young economist. He describes his reaction to Kádár's interference in the following way: The moment the party leader vetoed economic reform, he realized that the system could not be reformed and was condemned to failure.¹⁵ The late 1980s then saw the decline of Kádár, who, old and sick, had become an opponent of further reforms altogether.

There were numerous signs, particularly from the beginning of 1987, indicating that the Kremlin was no longer able or willing to keep his satellites under the same strict control as it had in the previous decades. The weakening of Soviet influence and the decline of Hungary's internal economic situation had a twofold effect, one supporting the other. Oppositional organizations grew stronger and could present their views more and more freely. In their journals, which were widely distributed, the names and addresses of the editors were printed openly, and the police practically ceased any persecution. The policy of human rights, emphasized above all by the United States, the effects of the Helsinki conference,

¹⁵ Oplatka, *Der erste Riss*, 40.

and the consequences of Hungary's debt reduced the communist regime's room to move. As Kádár himself recognized most reluctantly, it was no longer possible to use "administrative measures" against the opposition, since the Western countries, which were Hungary's creditors, were carefully watching the developments in Hungary's domestic political scene. To sum up, one might say that communist Hungary had become dependent on the West.¹⁶

In the same years, a power struggle started at the top of the ruling party. At stake was the position of Kádár's successor, although the old party leader himself did not seem inclined to withdraw. Of the candidates taking part in the succession struggle, the majority represented the next younger generation. The main dividing line, however, was that separating orthodox functionaries from reform-minded politicians. Many of these reformers had both personal and political links to members of the opposition.

The success and failure of a reform politician

The role played by Imre Pozsgay in this respect was of special importance. According to Kádár's suspicious judgment, Pozsgay was too liberal and therefore dangerous. Consequently, he had been banned from the party's first line and the government. In 1983 he was given the Patriotic Front to lead. This was a purely decorative body that structured and united the mass organizations. Yet, in the mid-1980s Pozsgay succeeded in making the Front a very active political force. Indeed, the group even took on the character of an independent political party. In particular, Pozsgay and the Front provided official authority and defense for radically reform-minded intellectuals. This enabled such intellectuals to publish critical articles or to write about sensitive political and economic topics.

One of these publications was titled *Fordulat és reform* (Shift and reform), written by several open-minded economists. It appeared in June 1987 and produced a political sensation.¹⁷ The excitement was understandable. Among other things, the authors put up the question for discussion whether the concepts of planned economy and market economy should continue to be treated as contradictory. In the same publication, the opinion was expressed that the only chance for the country's economy to recover was under radically changed political conditions, with the government controlled by a pluralistic parliament representing all segments of the population. It is clear that ideas like this went against the basic communist dogma.

By this time, Pozsgay had become one of the most popular politicians in the country. With his assistance, the Hungarian Democratic Forum was established on 27 September 1987. Pozsgay accepted the invitation to the founding ceremony—a gathering of about two hundred opposition figures—and had the courage to

¹⁶ Romsics, *Magyarország története*, 527.

¹⁷ "Fordulat és reform", *Közgazdasági Szemle* 34 (June 1987): 642–708.

make the decisions taken by the Forum public in an interview with the Hungarian daily *Magyar Nemzet*. Nonetheless, his political career practically ended in autumn 1989, when the former communist party split. Pozsgay was abandoned by the opposition, even by the Democratic Forum, and became, so to speak, politically homeless. When at the end of November 1989 a referendum was held to determine how to organize the future presidential elections, Pozsgay suffered a very narrow defeat. Unlike Pozsgay, the Democratic Forum, despite its support for him, did not want a popular election for the head of state but an indirect election through the parliament, and thus the Forum advised Pozsgay's followers not to vote. The other major party in 1989, the Alliance of Free Democrats, campaigned against Pozsgay—officially on the grounds that the country did not need a president with a communist past, but also with the strong motivation (not openly mentioned) that Pozsgay stood too close to the Democratic Forum. While this example confirms the popular adage that gratefulness has no place in politics, it also shows that in the first half of 1989, even Pozsgay, one of the best-informed public figures, did not expect the collapse of communist rule and the transition to liberal democracy to take place in the remarkably short time that it actually happened.¹⁸ Surprisingly, it seems that as late as the summer of 1989, Hungary's most important politicians still believed that the road to supreme power and through that, to the possibility of renewing the country, led through the position of the general secretary of the communist party. Had Pozsgay made up his mind earlier and left the party to join the Democratic Forum, he would have no doubt been elected president of the Hungarian Republic, exactly as he had wished.

The most remarkable success of the Hungarian opposition in the late 1980s, in its progress toward the changes that were to take place, was the rehabilitation of the popular uprising of 1956. Pozsgay, as already mentioned, had a part to play in this respect, but interestingly, also contributing to this process were Hungarians in exile in the United States. Kádár's successor, Károly Grósz, who at that time also occupied the post of prime minister, was to visit the United States in July 1988. As part of the visit, he also planned to meet Hungarians in American exile, although he was aware that this would certainly lead to a public confrontation over the problem of Imre Nagy. He knew that his countrymen would ask when the Hungarian leadership was planning to give permission for Nagy and the other executed victims of the 1956 revolution to be finally buried in a humane and dignified manner. In order to forestall sharp criticism in the United States, Grósz and his delegation, very much in need of Western help, yielded and allowed the opposition to organize a memorial for Imre Nagy and his friends. The party, however, insisted that the re-burial was to be seen as an act of piety, not as a political revision of the court sentence.¹⁹

¹⁸ Imre Pozsgay, 1989. *Politikus pálya a pártállamban és a rendszerváltásban* (Budapest: Püski, 1993), 184–89

¹⁹ Andrienne Molnár, „88 egy furcsa év volt“, Oral History Archive 14 (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2008), 239–78.

However, it turned out that this insistence was only wishful thinking. The huge crowd showing up on Budapest's Heroes' Square on 16 June 1989 transformed the celebration into an impressive political demonstration. In the speeches of oppositional politicians the democratic revolution of the year 1956 was praised, and the president of the Fidesz party, Viktor Orbán, who at the time was 26 years old, demanded the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Hungarian soil. There was no interference by the police. Instead, the celebration was broadcast on Hungarian radio and television. This made it clear to the entire country that a turning point had been reached; the legitimacy of the communist party had been shaken in an irreversible way. After all, Kádár and his comrades had received their power in November 1956 from the Soviet Army, and they had claimed for more than three decades that they had saved the country threatened by a "counterrevolution." If now, after thirty-three years, the uprising was suddenly legitimized as a democratic revolution of the Hungarian people, then there could be only one conclusion: the power of the ruling communist party was illegitimate.

Silence from Moscow

How did the Soviet Union react? What was the perception from the Hungarian side? What did Hungarian politicians know with regard to Moscow's real or possible behavior? To answer I will first relate a personal experience: In Mid-March of 1989 I had the opportunity to meet Pozsgay in Budapest. I asked him whether the Hungarians had received any signals from Moscow and Pozsgay's answer was: "There are none. They remain silent. It's a complete black-out." In the late 1980s, Western statesmen had tried to convince radical reformers in the Eastern bloc to avoid irritating Moscow by not proceeding too quickly. It was generally feared that Polish and Hungarian radicalism might undermine Gorbachev's position and bring hardliners back into power in the Kremlin. But Pozsgay and other Hungarian reform-politicians, due to their national interests, had a completely different point of view. The Soviet weakness, Pozsgay stated, must be used for quick changes; Hungary should move forward and go as far as possible to create a *fait accompli* before the Soviet Union recovered.

Soviet leadership, in fact, remained silent. Gorbachev assured Prime Minister Németh on 3 March 1989 that there would be "no new 1956" again as long as he held his post. Moscow agreed to negotiations concerning the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and removed the nuclear warheads on Hungarian soil at the end of November 1989. No critical Soviet comment was heard with regard to the rehabilitation of the Hungarian revolution and the round table talks. The Soviet Union also refrained from criticizing the Hungarian decision to remove the Iron Curtain and open the western border for East German refu-

gees. While Gorbachev opposed the introduction of a multi-party system by the Hungarians, he did not take any measures against it.²⁰

Controversial questions

There are several important details in the Hungarian history of 1989 that remain unclear and disputed, and since today's discourse is highly political, this makes some of the answers extremely difficult. Who created the turn, the big political changes in 1989? Who acted, who fought in the first line: the reform-communists or the dissidents, the opposition? Did a revolution take place, or was it rather an evolutionary development and transformation? Did the attitude of the population play a role and thus, did the government act under popular pressure, or did it ignore the masses since they remained passive? Would not the term "revolution from above" be more appropriate when characterizing the events in Hungary in 1989?

It is unclear when exactly Hungary's communist rulers recognized and accepted the fact that giving up communism and transitioning to a Western-type democratic system and market economy were inevitable. While the former foreign minister Gyula Horn professed in a private conversation that he had seen the coming changes "in the second half of the 1980s,"²¹ at the latest in 1989, some of the so-called reformers, for instance Prime Minister Németh, no longer were aiming at reforms or the transformation and improvement of the existing system, but at its abolishment and replacement. They considered their main task to be assuring a peaceful transition. This, however, was not everybody's aim. Károly Grósz, who had followed Kádár as the leader of the communist party, still believed at the beginning of 1989 that his party was facing a long-term struggle against the opposition and that the fight would last until the mid-1990s. In the spring of 1989, Grósz even deliberated whether he should opt for a military coup in order to save the communist system.²²

What can be said about the attitude of the population and the role played by the opposition? Unpublished opinion polls that the ruling party used to gain information about the mood of the population show that in 1981, and to some extent still in 1986, the majority of Hungarians basically had accepted Kádár's "goulash communism." More did not seem possible. While freedom remained restricted, living conditions, though modest, were satisfactory. The economic decline in the second half of the 1980s, however, is reflected in a rapid change in opinion polls 1988. The numbers speak for themselves: the regime had been rejected.²³ Con-

²⁰ Oplatka, *Der erste Riss*, 53–70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²² Tökés, *Negotiated revolution*, 297–98.

²³ Romsics, *Magyarország története*, 2nd ed. (Budapest: Osiris, 2005), 520–22.

sequently, there can be no doubt: A large majority of the population wished the system to be replaced. Later, it is clear that the opposition succeeded in mobilizing the masses. Hundreds of thousands took part in demonstrations, responding to political key-words like the fate of the Hungarian minority in Romania, or the rehabilitation of the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

The oppositional groups, formed above all by critical intellectuals, had begun to be active in the 1970s. For a long time they remained outsiders. While their activities irritated the regime and from time to time it reacted harshly, generally the party leadership believed that it could live with small groups of ineffective adversaries. In the second half of the 1980s, however, the opponents ceased to be outsiders. Without their insistence and pressure, the reburial of Imre Nagy and the other victims of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 would never have taken place. The same can be said about the round table negotiations, at which the representatives of the new parties were able to pass most of their political propositions. In these negotiations, which ended in September 1989, the basis of the constitutional state was laid down. The participants agreed on a legal framework that assured the transition to new democratic institutions.²⁴

However, these round table negotiations did not deal with the transformation of the economic system. The lack of regulations in this area resulted in the so-called spontaneous privatization. This meant that in many cases, party functionaries, being the best informed, having the best access to credit, and using their still-existing positions, were able to acquire enterprises and other assets. The metamorphosis of certain communists into capitalist entrepreneurs, quickly and shamelessly, produced a conflict that marks Hungary's political life even today. At least some of the population remains convinced that the former leaders simply converted their political power into economic privileges.

Finally, some remarks need to be made about the foreign political context. The first is commonplace: As in every Soviet satellite country in Central Europe, the changes that took place in Hungary were only possible because of the new circumstances in Moscow. It is clear that Gorbachev was looking for reform-minded allies. He sought to establish new leaders and to bring the more orthodox countries like the GDR and Romania onto the road of his perestroika. Nonetheless, he did not have the creation of liberal-capitalist societies in mind.

Discomfort in the West

More surprising is the fact that even the Western powers did not unanimously wish the communist countries to regain their independence and to introduce democracy. In the interim, quite a number of verbal and written statements have

²⁴ Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer, *Politische Geschichte Ungarns von 1985 bis 2002* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 156–68.

been found that confirm this attitude. This was not only due to anxiety about Gorbachev's position suffering because of Polish or Hungarian radicalism. As seen by certain Western politicians, maintaining the Warsaw Pact was still needed in 1989 in order to preserve the European balance of power. In certain Western capitals, the conviction also prevailed that reform-communists were better and more reliable partners than the uncertain and unknown newcomers in the ranks of the democratic opposition.

For instance, in mid-September 1989 Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the foreign minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, a democrat and liberal, declared to the Hungarian ambassador István Horváth that his government, as well as those of Italy, France and the United States, desired the upcoming free elections in Hungary in the spring of 1990 to be won not by the opposition, but by the reform-wing of the former communist party.²⁵ To answer the question why this was the attitude of Western leaders at the time, it is probably best to ask them directly. Of course, it is difficult some twenty years later to make them admit that in 1989–90 they preferred the continued rule of the reform communists in East Central Europe over a change of power favoring the democratic opposition. All told, however, it is probable that the main reason for their reaction was their fear that if the postwar order built by Moscow in 1945–48 were suddenly to collapse, Gorbachev's position would become untenable.

This finding is indeed strange, and from a historical point of view, even paradoxical. In Hungarian historiography, a *unité de doctrine* exists which states that the country lost its independence at the beginning of the sixteenth century and since then—with some short exceptions—has always had to bear foreign rule and abide by foreign interests. The opposite happened in 1989. Hungary, despite still being a satellite, a member of the Warsaw Pact and occupied by Soviet forces, Hungary, despite being admonished by the Western states to show patience and a low profile, acted independently. In doing so, it is clear that it proceeded both against Soviet and Western interests, with the result—Hungary's self-liberation—being attained without assistance.

²⁵ László Borhi, "Magyarország kötelessége a Varsói szerződésben maradni—az 1989-es átmenet nemzetközi összefüggései magyar források tükrében," *Külügyi Szemle*, no. 2–3 (2007): 255–72; Oplatka, *Der erste Riss*, 236–37.

