

# **Hungary 1956**

**Insurrection, workers' councils, the military question, "the proletariat storming heaven"**

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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE EVENTS</b>	<b>5</b>
The material bases . . . . .	5
Chronology . . . . .	8
The creation of the councils . . . . .	17
The military question . . . . .	21
<b>ANALYSIS</b>	<b>27</b>
Programme and practice of the CWCGB . . . . .	27
Why Hungary and not Poland? . . . . .	29
The military question . . . . .	31
The awareness of a necessary retreat . . . . .	32
Apogee and decline of workers' reformism . . . . .	34
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>36</b>
In French . . . . .	36
In English . . . . .	36
In Hungarian . . . . .	36

# INTRODUCTION

50 years after the insurrection which began on 23 October 1956 in Budapest and was drowned in blood by Stalinism, a second burial has taken place in the form of homage. What Stalinism did not succeed in doing: denying the workers' character of the insurrection, whether in the nature of the majority of its participants or in its organisation; was achieved by the democrats and nationalists, here and in Hungary. Not once during the commemorations did they speak of the workers, of their struggle and their organisation. On the contrary, the "Hungarian Revolution" was a "national", "moral" and "ethical" revolution, whose representative was the "brave" Imre Nagy who on this occasion they forgot had always been a Stalinist.

If they felt obliged to talk about the councils it was to reduce them to a kind of honest trade unionism and, in any case, to never mention the fact that after the military crushing of 7 November 1956, they continued and expanded their action for a month and a half. As for the military question, during the scandal which affected the Prime Minister Gurcsány in September 2006 we saw the Hungarian extreme right trying to ape the moment when the demonstration swung against Stalinism into a general insurrection, on 23 October 1956, by a pseudo-demo in front of the radio station. Also they forget the struggle, certainly desperate, of the miners of Salgótarján which continued until January 1957.

So, it is necessary to set the record straight:

- The 1956 revolution in Hungary was a workers' revolution;
- The workers constituted the majority of combatants and deaths against the Russian army, the AVO and the hostile sections of the Hungarian army;
- The workers organised themselves into councils and tried, in extremely difficult conditions to elaborate a political and theoretical programme which can be criticised today, but which constituted the high point of the limits of its time.

Whatever were its limits, its enemies of yesterday, the Stalinist killers and their accomplices in the Western bourgeoisies, understood very well what the danger was: the return of proletarian revolution to the stage of history.

Here it is not a question of criticising what happened in the past from a pre-established point of view but, above all, of taking account of the facts, the actions, methods and means by which the Hungarian workers organised themselves, struggled and tried to understand the revolutionary moment they were living through.

We have not analysed the importance of nationalism<sup>1</sup>, of anti-semitism, of the return of the fascists, of the hope of support from the Western countries or of the contradictory support given to Imre Nagy. To varying degrees these phenomena existed. But they were not determining factors

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<sup>1</sup> Or rather of "national sentiment" in an occupied country which had had part of its resources pillaged by its "liberator".

in the insurrection. We are only going to deal with the actions of the workers from the military and political sides.

In setting out this presentation the text is comprised of two parts, the events and the conclusions which we draw from them.

The first part therefore consists of:

- The material bases (capitalist development and worker composition) which allowed the insurrection to happen,
- a chronology,
- the creation of councils and their achievements,
- the way that the fighting and the military question were understood by the insurgents.

The second part consists of:

- a critique of the military question,
- an attempt to explain the choices which pushed the Russian bureaucracy to crush the insurrection,
- a critique of the programme of the councils,
- a synthesis on the impossibility of workers' reformism.

# THE EVENTS

## The material bases

In such a document we can't retrace the complete history of capitalist development in the Hungarian region, nor the complete history of workers' struggles and organisations, and even less detail the council revolution of 1919. Nevertheless, the revolution of 1956, principally in Budapest, was only able to develop itself with its specific characteristics because capitalist development had taken one trajectory and not another and as a counter point the working class itself also had specific traits. Let's look at the main points.

### **A unique capitalist development**

Contrary to the other European countries, Hungary did not undergo an economic development based on the textile industry or mining but on flour milling. Budapest was, by virtue of its geographic position, a transit point for cereals, which led to the creation of mills, starting in 1850, and then the mechanised industry necessary for their functioning<sup>1</sup> and for the processing of cereals, linked with the older industry of coach-building.

Starting from this mechanical industrial base there developed more diverse industry, including railway construction (locomotives and wagons), steel, food processing and then electricity and electrical engineering. The great industrialists of the epoch were Weiss (the Hungarian Schneider ruling on the island of Csepel, then a suburb of Budapest) steel, armaments, machine tools; Ganz, electricity, railways, shipyards, diesel engines; Láng, foundries, wagon factories, etc. This development was concentrated almost exclusively in Budapest and its region<sup>2</sup>, the workshop of Hungary, so much so that in 1896 the town had already acquired 600,000 inhabitants<sup>3</sup>, 1,200,000 in 1912 and 1,400,000 in 1920. This was accompanied by the growth of the number of workers in industry: 65,000 workers in 1896, 165,000 in 1912, 180,000 in 1920.

The end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a catastrophe for Hungarian Capital, cutting it off from a good part of its market, which had become "foreign". Nevertheless, after this shock, industrial development continued in the following years with the appearance of textiles<sup>4</sup>, automobiles<sup>5</sup> and aeronautics as well as the continuation of railways. From 1920 to 1938, industrial production grew by 28%. The Second World War, the German occupation and the destructions of 1945 slowed the industrial development.

But it resumed again after the arrival of the Stalinists in power in November 1948 in all sectors, even if, five year plans permitting, the accent was put on heavy industry whose symbol was the creation from nothing of the steel complex at Dunapentele renamed Sztalinváros ("Stalingrad!").

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<sup>1</sup> In 1913, for the whole of Hungary, there were 5000 factories employing 474,000 workers.

<sup>2</sup> Except for a few provincial towns like Miskolc and Győr, the coal field of Salgótarján, industry was only composed of food production and processing.

<sup>3</sup> And opened the first metro on the European continent.

<sup>4</sup> Concentrated also in Budapest.

<sup>5</sup> Above all buses and light lorries.

The reorganisation of industry (nationalisation of all firms with more than 100 employees, in March 1949, preceded in March 1946 by the “requisition” of the Weiss, Ganz and Láng factories) followed that of the banks (nationalisation in 1948), then the collectivisation of the land, translated itself into regroupments, fusions of pre-existing firms without necessarily investing in the renewal of the productive apparatus - the re-division of types of production within the Eastern bloc suppressing the goad of market competition.

### **1956: Workers’ Budapest**

In January 1950, the government decided to combine Budapest (14 central districts) with 23 suburban municipalities, having a population of 550,000 inhabitants. Some of these municipalities were only villages but others, such as Újpest, Kispest and Csepel were industrial and worker concentrations. This created a greater Budapest of twenty two districts composing 1,600,000 inhabitants and 300,000 employees<sup>6</sup> in an industry which covered all sectors.

Budapest thus possessed two unusual traits for a large western city: the central districts of Pest were always densely populated and the industrial infrastructure, present everywhere except on the hills of Buda, was very close to the town centre and was represented by big factories: Ganz Electric (Second District), MOM (Twelfth District), Beloiannis and Gamma (Eleventh) in Buda; MAVAG and Ganz Vagon (Eighth), Télefontyár (Fourteenth), Dreher and Kőbánya breweries (Tenth), Ganz shipyards (Thirteenth) and Óbuda (Third), Láng factory (Thirteenth).

In addition to the factories of the peripheral districts of Egyesült Izzó (Újpest, Fourth), Vörös Csillág (Kispest, Nineteenth) and Ikarus (Rákosmihály, Sixteenth), there are those of Csepel (Twenty First): oil refinery, vegetable oil factory, Csepeli Papirgyar (paper mill) and the Weiss complex (renamed “Mátiás Rákosi” in honour of the Hungarian Stalin since 1948) composed of 18 factories making steel, arms, munitions, machine tools, trucks, bicycles and motorbikes, etc.

Each one of these factories had a staff of 2-4000; the Csepel complex itself had 40,000 workers.

This proximity was favourable to organisation and contacts during the first moments of the insurrection, between workers and demonstrators and then between workers. Nevertheless, the workers of the Budapest councils complained, along with their comrades from the provinces, about the dimensions of the town (15 km from Csepel to Újpest, from south to north; 10 km from the Eleventh to the Sixteenth districts, from the west, for example) which in addition to the fighting which blocked the centre of the city created difficulties of communication. This was unlike the towns of the provinces, like Miskolc (the DIMAVAG factory) or Győr (the wagon factory Györi MAVAG and the truck factory RAABA), where one big factory concentrated them into councils and the workers’ guard and served as the rallying point for the population.

But apart from this concentration in the city, the working class had other traits which we have to emphasise in order to understand the conditions preceding the insurrection.

First of all let’s look at the class composition.

The factories of Budapest had not experienced the rationalisation at work in the West, that is to say the fantastic growth of unskilled workers. They were therefore traditional factories and, however advanced they were in terms of the conception of products, they still used a great deal of skilled labour.

This technically formed working class benefited more from the social promotion pushed forwards by the Stalinists who, via evening courses at the Technical University or by adult con-

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<sup>6</sup> Out of a total of million employed, which represented 28.2 % of the active population of Hungary.

tinuing education, allowed some workers an elevation in the technical hierarchy of the firm by becoming engineers.

It's important to appreciate that the party needed new engineers to counter-balance the power of the old engineers which it was not able to do without. They had technical power in research and design and in the organisation of production, but also trade union power because, from before the war, there existed a union of engineers and technicians with close to 2000 members in Budapest and which was quite combative. Despite the union's dissolution in 1948<sup>7</sup>, this corporatism which was hostile to the party apparatus never disappeared in the factories.

The paradox would be that workers who followed the courses at the University would thus be in contact with the Petöfi circle<sup>8</sup> and transmit its ideas into the factories, while the workers promoted to engineers would be the prime movers of the workers' councils.

Elsewhere the concrete conditions of existence of the workers were catastrophic: working conditions were deplorable, wages were low (the level of 1938 was only regained in 1956, while it had fallen by 75% between 1949 and 1952) and it was necessary to battle ceaselessly against piece rates and the increase of the norms.

The hopes of change born in 1944-45 had disappeared but the Nagy interlude (1953-1955) gave new hopes to the workers, who oscillated between enthusiasm (social promotion) and hostility (absenteeism, sloppiness, struggles against norms and piece rates). The return of the "hard Stalinists" to power translated itself into increased pressure in the factories. The pot began to boil from the summer of 1956.

Now let's look at the political formation.

After the crushing of the revolution of 1919, the CP experienced a phase of small group existence accentuated by Stalinisation. At the end of the Second World War the CP only had a few active militants (mostly in prison) in Hungary itself. Most of its leaders would return in the wagons of the Russian army, including Nagy, Gérö, Révai and Rákosi. In Budapest it was even a minority and small<sup>9</sup> in relation to the two other parties which came out of that of Aladár Weissshaus and Pál Demeny<sup>10</sup> in the pre-war years of splits in its ranks. The party of Demeny was well implanted in the factories of Csepel, Kispest and Rákospalota<sup>11</sup>. These two leaders were arrested when the Russians arrived, during a regroupment meeting, but the militants remained and contributed to influencing the workers to be critical towards the CP.

The social democratic party was ten times more important than the CP in terms of number of militants in 1945 and was hegemonic in the factories of Budapest. While the left of the SDP fused

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<sup>7</sup> Led by the social democrat architect József Fischer (1901-1995).

<sup>8</sup> From the name of the poet nationalist hero of the revolution of 1848-49, this circle was founded on 25 March 1955, on the initiative of militants of the CP and Young Communists close to Imre Nagy. The Petöfi circle was a place for discussions by reformers within the party which would transform itself, starting in summer 1956, into a centre of anti-Stalinist agitation. Thus, it organised a meeting on 27 June 1956 of 5000 people.

<sup>9</sup> Barely a thousand members for the CP.

<sup>10</sup> See Miklós Molnár *De Béla Kun à János Kádár* pp. 177 and following pages. Pál Demeny (1901-1991) engaged in the revolution and the CP from 1918, was excluded in 1927, many times arrested under the Horthy regime, was arrested in February 1945 by the Stalinists, was condemned to 11 years in prison and freed on 13 October 1956. Aladár Weissshaus (1887-1963) was an organiser of the railway workers of Budapest before and during the revolution of 1919, then a militant of the CP, expelled in 1926, arrested in February 1945, condemned to 11 years in prison and freed in February 1956.

<sup>11</sup> According to J.Papp *La Hungary libérée* pp. 92, the Demeny group had 700 militants and 1300 sympathisers in 1940 in Budapest. At the Liberation, the CP had only 3000 militants in the whole of Hungary.

with the CP (a consequence of the subterranean work of Marosán)<sup>12</sup>, many workers joined the CP but maintained their critical spirit and would contribute to the formation of other workers, for example Sándor Bali who influenced Sándor Rác (the future leader of the Workers' Council of Greater Budapest), both workers (and toolmakers) at the Beloiannis factory.

Without making too much of an artificial division based on the yardstick of just a few examples it nevertheless appears that the working class in 1956 was divided into three groups based on age:

- The youngest who were between 20 and 28 who knew of no other reality than the factory and triumphant Stalinist society,
- The intermediaries who were between 30 and 40 who had had a political education before Stalinism,
- The oldest, who were between 55 and 65, who had been able to participate in the revolution of the councils of 1919.

But this political consciousness was completely informal, the Stalinist CP having absorbed everything into its ranks, and there was obviously no legal opposition or clandestine groups.

One of the major paradoxes of the working class in Hungary is that the CP was hegemonic and therefore the future leaders and organisers of the councils came out of its ranks, making it implode, but some of them maintained attachments to and illusions in Stalinism.

## Chronology

### The tremors

1953

5 March: death of Stalin

13-16 June: the leadership of the Hungarian CP convenes in Moscow. Mátiás Rákosi gives way to Imre Nagy as head of the government but remains First Secretary of the Party.

17-18 June: workers' insurrection in East Berlin.

4 July: discussion about the enthronement of Nagy: The "new course" of Nagy rests on relaxing the pressure on the peasants, the right for them to leave the collective farms, giving priority to investment in consumption goods (rather than heavy industry), partial amnesty for prisoners, the closing of internment camps and labour camps, the right to return to the towns for those "exiled" to the countryside, religious tolerance.

1954

5 July: riot in Budapest following the defeat of the Hungarian football team in the final of the World Cup in Berne. Local strikes during the summer.

1955

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<sup>12</sup> György Marosán (1908-1992) leader of the food workers union in 1939, member of the social democratic party in 1941, an official of the party in Budapest in 1945, organiser of its "left" tendency but in fact a spy for the Stalinists, was the architect of the fusion. The resulting single party then had a million members, that is one in ten of the inhabitants. The purges of 1950-52 excluded 483,000 of those members. Marosán himself would be condemned to death in 1950 and awaited his execution up until the spring of 1956 when he was freed and reintegrated into the politburo of the CP.



25 March: foundation of the Pétőfi circle in Budapest.

14 April: Imre Nagy is sacked from the post of head of government and replaced by András Hegedüs, Rákosi's man.

1956

14-25 February: Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the Khrushchev report.

April 1956: the pot boils: strikes in the factories of Csepel. The Pétőfi circle becomes the centre of opposition.

18 June: during a meeting of the Pétőfi circle, Júlia Rajk calls for the rehabilitation of her husband László Rajk, an old leader of the CP, shot in 1949.

27 June: another meeting of the Pétőfi circle where 5000 people demand political change. The debate, starting at 19.00, lasts until 4.00 in the morning and continues in the street after the end of the meeting.

28 June: worker uprising in the Zispo factories of Poznań (Poland) repressed by the Polish security forces. The impact is enormous in Hungary.

18 July: Rákosi is sacked by Mikoian/Souslov, leaves for the USSR and is replaced by Ernő Gerő. Renewal of the Political Bureau of the CP (Kádár and Marosán, for example, rejoin it).

July: strikes in Csepel.

6 October: the national funeral of Rajk in the Farkasrét cemetery in Budapest, which Gerő and Nagy attend, turns into a demonstration of 100,000 people hostile to the regime.

16 October: in the University of Szeged, the students found an association which is independent of the Party and travel all over the country to inform the other universities.

19 October: Khrushchev comes to Warsaw and anoints Gomułka General Secretary of the Polish CP.

20-21 October: rallies and public meetings organised by the students are joined by workers in many towns in the provinces.

22 October: rallies in the universities of Budapest provoked by the arrival of students from Szeged who have created an organisation independent of the Party and have come to explain their action and demands. "The wind blows in from Poland", notably in the technical university (situated in Buda). At the beginning the demands are specific to the University but quickly go beyond this framework to arrive after 21 hours at the famous points, which include the departure of the Russian troops.

- A new Party leadership must be elected,
- Imre Nagy as Prime Minister,
- Hungarian-Russian and Hungarian-Yugoslav friendship but the departure of Russian troops,

Multi-party elections,

- The economy to be led by specialists<sup>13</sup>,
- The system of norms to be revised,

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<sup>13</sup> And no longer by functionaries of the Party.

- Relaxation of the agricultural production quota and support to independent producers,
- A review of political trials, amnesties, rehabilitations of those condemned at the Mihály Farkas trials<sup>14</sup>,
- The Hungarian flag of 1848 and holidays in connection with the war of 1848-49 against the Habsburgs,
- Freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

This deed followed a growing agitation in the universities of Budapest, Szeged and Debrecen for a week. There were 4000 participants in the rally at the Technical University. The decision was taken at the assembly to organise a demonstration for the next day.

At Miskolc, following the student agitation which lasted several days, the workers of the factory of DIMAVAG<sup>15</sup> decided to create a factory council which put forward a programme of demands in 21 points (which included the ten points mentioned above) and took over the running of the factory.

### **Tuesday 23 October 1956**

*"From here to tomorrow we will overturn the world!"*

Banned at 13.00, then authorised by the government at 14.30, several demonstrations set off: one to Pest in front of the statue of Pétőfi, which the students from the Eötvös Lorant University of Law participated in, another, to Buda, leaving from the Technical University towards the statue of General Bem. The first joined the second then passed the West Station where it left at 17.00 with workers joining it. At 19.00, the demonstration, which comprised 100-150,000 people, decided to gather in Pest, in Parliament Square where Ernő Gerő arrived around 22.00 to make an arrogant speech on the radio at the same time.

Then Nagy, returning from holiday, as a matter of urgency made a speech in Parliament at 21.00, not promising very much. Part of the demonstrators went to Hősök tere (Place of the Heroes) to tear down the statue of Stalin, another part to the radio station on Brody Sándor utca<sup>16</sup>, to protest against Gerő's speech. At 22.00 the troops of the AVO<sup>17</sup> (500 to 600 members) who were guarding the building opened fire. This was the beginning of the insurrection. The radio station was only taken the next day towards 11.00 by the insurgents. The balance sheet would be 40 deaths on the side of the occupants and around 200 on the side of the insurgents.

Units of the Hungarian army sent to reinforce the defence of the radio station allowed themselves to be disarmed by the demonstrators or passed over to their side. Some workers returned to the factories where the night shift stopped work and seized some arms depots of the workers'

<sup>14</sup> The old sinister Minister of Defence responsible for the political trials of 1949-1952.

<sup>15</sup> Situated in the neighbourhood of Diósgyőr, in the middle of a valley, 4 km from the centre of town, this factory employed thousands of workers and made military material, wagons and machine tools. It was the main factory of the town.

<sup>16</sup> Placename terminology: utca = road, utja = avenue, út = road, körút = boulevard, tér = place, körtér = roundabout, köz = passage, híd = bridge, rakpart = quay.

<sup>17</sup> The ÁVO (*Magyar Államrendőrség Államvédelmi Osztálya*), the Department of Protection of the State of the Hungarian Police, was the political police in Hungary from 1946 to 1950. The ÁVH (*Államvédelmi Hatóság*), the Authority of the Protection of the State, succeeded it from 1950 to 1956. But for the Hungarian population the two represented the same thing, arbitrary policing, and they associated them in the same hatred. Therefore we use these two names interchangeably. The AVH had, in 1956, a staff of 35,000 and the average salary of its agents was three times that of the workers, in addition to benefits in kind.

militia and some stock from armaments factories. To some extent all over Budapest battles began against the political police.

In the provinces, as the news from Budapest became known, the insurrection started up in Győr and Miskolc, industrial towns in the west and north-east of Hungary.

#### **The first Russian intervention (24/10 – 29/10)**

24 October:

Russian units stationed in the provinces (from Székesfehérvár 70 km to the south-west and from Cégled 80 km to the south-east) arrived in Budapest in the early hours of the morning: several hundred T-34 tanks and from 6000 to 7000 soldiers. They had been on a state of alert since 22 October. They were then joined by troops coming from the Ukraine who gathered on 21 October at Záhony, a frontier post between Hungary and the Ukraine<sup>18</sup>. Spontaneous resistance groups organised themselves against the AVO and the Russian troops while trying to fraternise with the latter. The main places of battle were: Széna tér and Móricz Zsigmond körtér in Buda; Corvin köz, Tűzoltó utca, the station at Ferencváros, the West Station in Pest; the industrial complex of Csepel.

The radio announced the nomination of Nagy as the head of the government, the promulgation of martial law and the appeal made by Nagy to the Russian Army (in fact, it was Gerő who appealed to them) who had intervened at dawn against the insurgents.

The spontaneous general strike was total. In Budapest, in addition to the big factories, all the municipal and transport services were on strike.

Revolutionary district committees appeared, for example, in Újpest, but also in the provinces (Győr, Miskolc). The first workers' council in Budapest was created in the factory of Egyesült Izzó in Újpest, then in the metallurgical complex of Csepel. They spread across the whole country starting from 25 October.

Sándor Kopacsi<sup>19</sup>, colonel prefect of police of Budapest since 1952, went over to the side of the insurgents and distributed arms to students, organising units linked to the police headquarters.

In the provinces, everywhere revolutionary committees composed of delegates from the councils of workers, soldiers and peasants took power and disarmed the political police. Radio Miskolc and Radio Győr were in the hands of the revolutionary forces. The first delegations were sent to the Nagy government which made new promises and tried to make the insurgents lay down their arms.

25 October:

Gerő, secretary of the Party, is removed from his post by Souslov and Mikoïan who arrived the day before in Budapest and is replaced by János Kádár. Nagy and Kádár promise reforms, but demand that the insurgents lay down their arms.

In front of Parliament, where there is a peaceful demonstration fraternising with the Russian tank drivers<sup>20</sup>, there is a fusillade of bullets fired into the crowd and at the Russian tanks (certainly by the AVO) from the Ministry of Defence. Then the Russian troops fire in all directions. The result: one hundred or so dead.

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<sup>18</sup> See T.Méray *Budapest* Collection Ce jour-là. Robert Laffont, 1966, pp. 222 and following.

<sup>19</sup> Born in 1922, son of a social democrat leader from Miskolc, he was himself a militant of this party for 15 years.

<sup>20</sup> The slogans were "Down with Gerő!", "Long Live Nagy!", "We are not fascists!"

Colonel Pál Maléter, who previously wanted to retake the Kilián barracks from the insurgents of the Corvin passage, passes the next day on to the side of the insurrection and provides it with some armoured cars.

26 October:

The fighting continues. In Mosonmagyaróvár (a town close to the Austrian frontier), the National Guard fires on a demonstration, causing 52 deaths.

The spontaneous opening of the prisons by the insurgents: 5500 prisoners freed. In total, up until 4 November, 17,000 prisoners will be freed of which 75% will be common law prisoners and 25% political.

27 October:

Formation of a national government: Nagy makes an appeal to the old parties (peasant, small owners, social-democrats). The first pause in the fighting and fraternisation in some places with the Russian troops.

28 October:

The radio announces a cease-fire. Nagy presents the programme of the new government and demands the withdrawal of the Russian troops.

Gerő, Hegedüs (ex-Prime Minister), Bata (ex-Minister of Defence), Piros (ex-Minister of the Police) leave Hungary for the USSR.

New leadership of the CP: János Kádár, general secretary, three more Stalinists maintained (Antal Apró, András Hegedüs and Ferenc Münnich) and Imre Nagy and György Szántó, reformers.

Constitution of revolutionary councils in some units of the army.

29 October:

Street confrontations and negotiations continue. The Nagy government tries to take control of the insurgents by creating a new National Guard. The beginning of numerous meetings in parliament between Nagy and delegations of combatants. During one of these, Nagy addresses himself to Csongovai, leader of the fighters of Tűzoltó utca, saying: *“Don’t you believe that I am as Hungarian as you?”*, to which Csongovai replied *“Maybe, but what counts now is not who is the biggest Hungarian, but who is the biggest revolutionary!”*

30 October:

The Russian troops leave Budapest. Confrontations on Köztársaság tér (Republic Square) at the headquarters of the CP in Budapest, where the AVO have taken refuge. Imre Mező, secretary of the Party for Budapest, is killed and various AVO are lynched. Nagy denies having proclaimed martial law and called on the Russians. Despite their reservations, all of the revolutionary councils affirm their support for the Nagy government. Delegations continue to flow into Budapest. Cardinal Mindszenty is freed. The old parties are reconstituted. 25 new daily papers are published.

The new cabinet is limited and is constituted, after having received the approbation of the territorial councils. It is composed of Nagy, Kádár and Losonczy for the ex-CP; Zoltán Tildy and Béla Kovacs, for the small owners’ party and Ferenc Erdei for the peasant party, and a seat for the Social Democrat Party.

The terrible twins Mikoian and Souslov return to Budapest: they promise to respect multi-partyism if the *“fundamentals of socialism”* are not threatened, and they affirm their support for Nagy. In fact, their choice has already been made and confirmed: the green light for the second Russian intervention has been given.

31 October:

Radio Moscow announces that the Russian government is ready to negotiate the withdrawal of its troops. The councils in the provinces signal the arrival of new Russian units in Hungary. The CP is dissolved and replaced by the Workers' Socialist Party.

A discussion is held at the Kilián barracks about the constitution of a national council of defence between Pál Maléter and Béla Király, representative of the National Guard, in relation to the attempt by Maléter to arrest József Dudás, the leader of a group of insurgents from the centre of Budapest who occupied the Foreign Ministry. This was something Király opposed. In fact two lines confront each other in the government: Maléter wants to maintain the primacy of the army and is suspicious of uncontrolled groups of fighters, while Király, himself an organiser of the army in 1944-45, is for the amalgamation of the civil and military insurgents within the National Guard and is therefore in competition with the army. But the objective is the same, to re-establish order by disarming the "uncontrollable" groups of insurgents so as to establish the legitimacy of the Nagy government and the state.

Meeting between the delegates from the factories of Ganz, Mávag, Láng, Beloianisz and Egyesült Izzó which defines the role of the factory councils and adopts a programme of nine points of which the first specifies "*The factory belongs to the workers*"<sup>21</sup> and the others added "*the supreme element of authority is the workers' council elected democratically by the workers*", "*The directors and the management must be elected by the workers*" and "*in all important acts — salary scales, hiring, redundancy, division of benefits — it is the workers' council which makes the decision*"

Meeting between the delegates of a dozen factories of Kelenföld (Eleventh district) including Beloianisz, Gamma, the tram depot etc.

1 November:

Russian troops encircle the airports of Budapest. Protest from Nagy, a complaint to the UN and a declaration of the neutrality of Hungary and its withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. At Győr, the revolutionary council disperses a rally organised by the bourgeois parties. Kádár, after having saluted "*the glorious uprising*", disappears. During a meeting with the delegation of the workers' councils of Csepel, Nagy pleads for a return to work.

2 November:

The workers' councils of the big factories of Budapest decide to return to work on 5 November. The revolutionary council of Borsod-Miskolc calls for the constitution of a national revolutionary council made up of revolutionary councils and workers' councils to replace the old parliament.

3 November:

Reshuffle of the Nagy government. Maléter is to represent the insurgent forces and the Ministry of Defence. A speech on the radio (Radio Budapest controlled by the government) by Cardinal Mindszenty. Radio Free Europe puts forward the slogan "*Mindszenty to power*" Maléter and the Hungarian military officials who are invited to come and negotiate the details of the Russian departure are arrested at Tököl airport<sup>22</sup>.

**The second Russian intervention, Sunday 4/11 – Monday 12/11**

4 November:

The Russians attack Budapest in the early hours with fresh troops (6000 tanks and 200,000 men). In fact troop movements had begun on 1 November, the first units arriving from the Ukraine bypassed Miskolc and arrived at Budapest from the south-east. At Szolnok, they were rejoined

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<sup>21</sup> Bob Dent, *Budapest 1956 Locations of a drama*, p. 341.

<sup>22</sup> Tököl is situated on the island of Csepel, 5 km to the south of Budapest.

by units coming from Romania. Kádár, who had been out of sight for several days (in Moscow since 2 November), announced that he had taken the leadership of a government of workers and peasants supported by the Russians. Fighting in the streets starts up again across the country. Nagy flees to the Yugoslav embassy. The general strike is total.

The Russians benefit from the support of the “fraternal countries” and the Western neutrality caused by the Anglo-French intervention in the Suez Canal starting on 29 October. We know today that American neutrality was acquired on 22 October!

5–12 November:

Fighting continues across the country. The last resistance takes place in Pécs, where the miners retreat into the bunkers of mount Mecksen and continue to harass the Russian convoys, and in the workers’ neighbourhoods of Csepel in Budapest as well as in the Salgótarján region.

On 12 November, the revolutionary committee of Újpest launches an appeal for the formation of a Central Workers’ Council.

The Central Workers’ Council of Greater Budapest (Nagy-Budapesti Központi MunkásTanács)

13 November:

A delegation of several workers’ councils from Budapest is received by Kádár who only wants to give economic power to the workers’ councils. A meeting around Miklós Gimes, Sándor Fekete and Balázs Nagy<sup>23</sup> creates the FSS (*Független Szocialista Szövetség* / Independent Socialist League).

14 November:

Formation of the Central Workers’ Council of Greater Budapest during a meeting at the Egyesült Izzó factory. The CWC calls for the suspension of the strike. 500 representatives (from all the big factories of Budapest and delegates from the district councils, as well as delegates from the councils of the provinces such as Borsod) designate an executive of 22 members. Partial strike.

The elaboration of a political programme around some demands (presented to Kádár): withdrawal of the Soviet troops, elections based on a secret ballot on the basis of a multi-party system, formation of a democratic government, truly socialist and in no way capitalist ownership of the factories, maintenance of the workers’ councils, reestablishment of independent trade unions, abolition of the so-called transmission belt unions, respect for the right to strike, freedom of the press, of association, of religion.

Kádár’s reply: *“You have the right to not recognise my government. That doesn’t matter. I am supported by the Soviet Army and you are free to do what you want. If you don’t work, that’s your business. Here in Parliament, we will always have food and lighting”.*

15 November:

The CWC transfers itself into the local offices of the BKV<sup>24</sup> on Akácfa utca, in the Seventh District.

Árpád Balázs, president of the council of greater Budapest is removed from his post for having interpreted the slogan of a return to work as meaning a recognition of the Kádár government and appealing, on the Radio, for work to resume. The Council had to go and explain itself in front of the discontented assemblies in the factories. Dévényi, from Csepel, is named president. The Russians organise arrests and deportations to the USSR. Often the people arrested are just

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<sup>23</sup> Oppositional militants of the CP, organisers of the Pétőfi Circle, they became Trotskyists. Gimes (1917-1958), a journalist, was arrested and would be condemned at the Imre Nagy trial and shot in 1958. Balázs Nagy succeeded in crossing to the West.

<sup>24</sup> *Budapesti közlekedési vállalat* (Budapest transport company)

passers-by taken at random so as to create a climate of terror. In the provinces, there is a dual power between the revolutionary councils on one side and the political police and officials of the party supported by the Russian army on the other.

16 November:

The last centre of resistance in Budapest, the hospital of Péterfy utca, is attacked and falls.

17 November:

Second meeting between the CWC and Kádár. No progress. Faced with the proposal from the CWC *“of a return to work on Monday 19 November, on condition that its government enters into negotiation with the Soviets, within a given time, on their withdrawal and that it guarantees the reintegration of Imre Nagy into the government”*, Kádár plays for time.

18 November:

Meeting between the CWC and the Russian commander Grebennik.

19 November:

Convocation of all the delegates of the revolutionary councils from the provinces in Budapest to constitute a National Workers' Council. The return to work in Budapest, decided after many discussions within the CWC and in the factory assemblies, is applied. In the provinces, the strike was always total; the miners of Tatabánya had even flooded the mines.

21 November:

Even though Major General Grebennik had agreed to participate in the meeting of the CWC, he was accompanied by 400 tanks. The Russian army thus prevented the meeting of the delegates of the workers' councils in the Sports Palace of Budapest, but part of them managed to meet, bringing together delegates from the provinces and those from Budapest. The first lot (particularly the miners from Salgótarján, Tatabánya and Pécs) reproached the second for having gone back to work: *“If you want to work, do it, but we will not provide either coal or electricity. We will flood all the mines!”*.

The Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest ratified the slogan of a 48-hour strike decided by the workers before the intervention of the Russians against the delegates. A permanent liaison is put in place between the Council of Greater Budapest and the councils of the provinces. The president Dévényi, seen as too half-hearted, was removed and replaced by Rácz, a 23-year old worker from the Beloianisz factory. Bali (also from the Beloianisz factory) and Kalocsai (from the vegetable oil factory of Csepel) were named as vice-presidents.

The CWC decided to publish a daily news sheet to counter balance the false information put out by the Kádár government on the Radio and in the Press.

22 November:

Imre Nagy is arrested at the Yugoslav embassy where he has taken refuge.

23 November:

To commemorate the anniversary of the start of the revolution, the central council decides that, for one hour, no one will go out on to the streets of Budapest. This is observed. Russian troops are deployed.

25 November:

Meeting between the CWC and the government.

From 23 to 30 November: several meetings between the CWC and the Russians.

2 December:

The arrest by the Russians of Rácz and Bali in the Beloianisz factory. They are freed following an immediate strike of the whole factory.

4 December:

The factory assemblies propose to organise a demonstration in Budapest to mark the first month since the second Russian intervention. The Central Council proposes that only women participate in it.

An attempt to arrest Sebestyén at the M.O.M factory. Faced with a total strike of the workers, the armoured cars perform a U-turn.

5 December:

Miklos Gimes is arrested. The police try to arrest Rác and Bali who succeed in hiding out in their factory. Faced with the resolution of the workers, the police force dare not intervene. The arrest of a large number of members of the workers' councils.

7 December:

Demonstrations in Budapest by women with flowers in their hands who go to the monument of Heroes' Square. These demonstrations have been called by the CWC to mark the first month of the Russian occupation.

8 December:

In Salgótarján, the Russians fire on the miners and cause several deaths.

9 December:

A 48-hour strike is decided to protest against repression. The government decides on the dissolution of the Council of Greater Budapest "*whose members prefer to occupy themselves exclusively with political questions so as to construct a new power opposed to the executive organs of the state*"

Almost all the arrested members of the CWC are freed.

11 December:

General strike. Called by Kádár "*for discussion*", Rác and Bali leave their factory and are arrested in parliament. The Revolutionary Committee of Intellectuals is dissolved.

12 December:

Riots in Eger, freeing of members of the local workers' council previously arrested.

13 December:

The Beloiannisz factory goes on strike to protest against the arrest of Rác and Bali. Bali is freed (he will be re-arrested in 1957) but Rác stays in prison. Across the country the Kádár government, supported by the Russians, regains police control of the population. Numerous arrests of workers' council delegates.

### **The End**

15 December: the Kádár government decrees the death penalty for going on strike.

17 December: first death penalties handed down.

26 December: declaration of Marosán on the necessity of "*killing 10,000 workers to break the councils*"

8 January: the central council of the industrial complex of Csepel is dissolved.

11 and 12 January: The workers of the industrial complex of Csepel go on strike. The police intervene; one death. Workers' barricades swept away by the security forces.

September: Dissolution of the last workers' councils.

*Népszabadszag*, the newspaper of the Party, denounces the workers' councils as being a "*creation of the counter-revolution*"



## The creation of the councils

### A generalised eruption

Very rapidly, on 24 October in the morning, the general strike spread like wild fire in Budapest and in the provinces. It was massive, and in Budapest many workers participated in the first battles. Even though the factories were often protected by armed workers, the workers' presence was not complete (Töke<sup>25</sup> says that on 25 October, the council of his factory was only chosen by 800 out of 3000 workers, for example). Nevertheless, in all the factories the workers (but also the salaried staff, the engineers) created their organs, the workers' councils, and took their first decisions.

In Budapest, within a few days, the councils were present in all the large factories<sup>26</sup>, the enterprises connected with the municipality (water, gas, electricity, sewage), transport (BKV and MAV<sup>27</sup>), services (IBUSZ, the travel agency and its hotels), the ministries and even the national bank, which explained that wages would be paid until 4 November. To these we can add the district councils (the 16 administrative districts where the population was mostly workers).

In the provinces, the town of Miskolc saw the first council, that of the DIMAVAG factory which was created on 22 October. Then, in all the towns of the provinces, factory councils and even more town councils like at Győr, Debrecen, Szeged, Pécs, Veszprém, Szolnok, Sopron, Dunapentele, and the mining towns of Dorog, Tatábánya and Salgótarján flourished. There were even some peasant councils.

After 4 November and the second Russian intervention, the councils centralised themselves in Budapest, first by district, then at the level of the city by the creation of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest on 14 November, which also had some participation from delegates of councils in the provinces.

Before coming back to the CWC, let's look at some examples of the birth, life and death of the workers' councils.

### Újpest district council

This was created on 24 October after the events during the night in which workers had seized arms. A very informal meeting took place in the local offices of the district town hall which gathered several hundred people and which chose Pál Kósa, a 35-year old carpenter<sup>28</sup>, as the president. The discussions were open to everyone but the decisions were under the control of the participants. The rotation of chosen representatives happened quickly enough according to the proposals made. The workers coming from the factories of the district were armed, which gave a certain weight to the commitments made by the committee (35 members) to the assembly.

According to a participant, Miklós Péterfi<sup>29</sup>, the atmosphere resembled "*that of the Winter Palace in 1917*". Thus, "outsiders" like the intellectual Miklós Krassó, member of the Pétófi circle, could speak on 26 October, be applauded and co-opted on the spot on to the committee of the

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<sup>25</sup> See Ferenc Töke "*Ce que furent les conseils ouvriers hongrois*" ("What the Hungarian workers' councils did"), appearing in *Etudes* (Brussels), n°3, 1960, published in Jean-Jacques Marie and Balazs Nagy, *Pologne-Hongrie 1956*, EDI, Paris, 1966.

<sup>26</sup> The first was created at the Egyesült Izzó factory, on 24 October, followed by the factories of Gamma Optikai Művek, Danuvia Szerszámgyár (the machine-tools factory of Danuvia), Óbudai Hajógyár (Óbuda shipyards), Orion, Ikarus then the next day at Beloianisz, Téli fonyár, the factories of Csepel, etc.

<sup>27</sup> *Magyar Államvasutak*, the Hungarian state railway.

<sup>28</sup> Pál Kósa, a militant of the CP since 1945, had led a group of combatants during the night of 23-24 October.

<sup>29</sup> Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 335.

council<sup>30</sup>. But the council was not only a centre of discussion. It established a workers' guard responsible for defence and maintaining order, a group for surveillance of prisoners (officers of the AVO, leaders of the Stalinist Party, factory managers) of around thirty people, a group in charge of provisions, a propaganda group responsible for papers and leaflets and a group for liaison with the factory committees of the district as well as other combat groups and even the committee of the maritime police on the Danube.

The various political positions taken by the Council and which distinguished it from the others were the demand for withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, the opposition to the return to work on 5 November (a position taken before the return of the Russians) and a defiance of the Nagy government.

When the Russians came back, on 4 November, the committee negotiated an agreement with them whereby they wouldn't enter the district. Nevertheless, the Russians launched the assault of 8 November with troop reinforcements and crushed the combatants in one day. On 12 November, during another meeting with the Russians, the members of the committee were arrested. They were not brought to trial until May 1959, but Kósa and six other members were condemned to death and executed on 5 August 1959, while 24 others were sentenced to 20 years in prison.

### **The Újpest factory of Egyesült Izzó**

This factory<sup>31</sup> which was created in 1901 to make lamps and electronic valves, had always been a stronghold of workers' organisations in Újpest. In 1956 the factory employed 4000 workers. The factory committee was founded on 24 October, the first day of the spontaneous general strike. On 27 October it made its first actions public and declared that it had taken control of the factory. Its first measures were the sacking of the management of the enterprise, closing down the personnel department<sup>32</sup> and burning its archives<sup>33</sup>, abolishing piece rates and raising wages. A committee of 71 members was put in place which was responsible for organising the strike. As one of the members of the council, Lajos Garai, said, "*The time when the bosses decided our fate is over*"<sup>34</sup>

On 14 November the factory accommodated 500 delegates who participated in the creation of the Central Workers' Council Greater Budapest.

### **Csepel**

The town of Csepel, situated on the northern point of the island of Csepel, had been part of Budapest since 1950. Starting in 1892, when the munitions factory was founded by Manfréd Weiss, it became the location of the biggest industrial complex in Budapest which extended along the Danube from the port and was 2.5 km long and 1 km wide, composed of factories employing 40,000 workers.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, then during the councils revolution of 1919, the strikes of September 1943 against the Horthy regime, those of 1945-48, the workers of Csepel were at the cutting edge of workers' struggles. The town gained the name "*Vörös Csepel*", Red Csepel.

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<sup>30</sup> This is the same Krassó who was the first to propose the creation of the Central Council during the meeting on 14 November at the Egyesült Izzó factory.

<sup>31</sup> Its complete name was "*Egyesült Izzó Lámpagyár*" (unified factory for incandescent lamps).

<sup>32</sup> Or, in modern corporate English, the "Human Resources Department".

<sup>33</sup> The burning took place in front of the factory assembly and was received with great joy. Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 339.

<sup>34</sup> Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 339.

If in 1956, 27 % of the workers had less than five years of seniority and 50% were not there in 1949, the new generation was no less rebellious towards the despotism of the firm and the old militants of the left social democrats and the oppositional CP were always active.

The councils appeared in Csepel on 25 October, as much in the industrial complex (in fact in each of the 18 factories) as in the other factories (oil refinery, vegetable oil plant, paper factory).

At the machine-tool factory, it was a turner, Elek Nagy<sup>35</sup>, who was elected as a delegate from the factory then a delegate from the industrial complex then one of the organisers of the Central Workers' Council of the district on 31 October. Another worker delegate of the complex, József Bácsi<sup>36</sup>, explained that the creation of the councils was entirely spontaneous, outside the Party, in a ripe situation, even though 40% of the members of the Central Workers' Council of the district were old members of the CP. From the beginning the council of Csepel expressed reservations about the policies of the Nagy government without pronouncing its definitive defiance. On the general level the council proposed the creation of a National Workers' Council, "*a parliament of the producers*"<sup>37</sup> The programme of the council was as follows:

- The factory belongs to the workers. The council will pay a deduction to the state calculated on the base of production and a part of the profits.
- The supreme controlling body of the factory is the Workers' Council democratically elected by the workers.
- The Workers' Council elects its own executive committee composed of 3 to 9 members, which acts as the executive corps of the Workers' Council, applying decisions and tasks fixed by it.
- The director is employed by the factory. The director and the highest managers must be elected by the Workers' Council. This election will have place after a general public meeting convened by the executive committee.
- The director is responsible to the Workers' Council for everything concerning the factory.
- The Workers' Council itself reserves for itself all rights to:
  - Approve and ratify all projects relating to the enterprise;
  - Decide the level of basic salaries and the methods by which they must be evaluated;
  - Decide on everything concerned with foreign contracts;
  - Decide on the conduct of all operations involving loans.
- In the same way, the Workers' Council resolves all conflicts connected with the hiring and firing of all workers employed in the workplace.
- The Workers' Council has the right to examine the accounts and decide on how to make use of the profits.

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<sup>35</sup> Elek Nagy (1926-1994), arrested January 1957, sentenced in February 1958 to 12 years, freed in 1963.

<sup>36</sup> József Bácsi, born en 1926, arrested January 1957, sentenced in February 1958 to 10 years, freed in 1963.

<sup>37</sup> Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 351.

- The Workers' Council takes charge of all social questions in the workplace.

But the question for the first week, after the departure of the Russian troops, was that of whether to stop the strike. On this crucial point, at that moment (and also after the second Russian intervention), the Csepel council had “centrist” attitude, preferring an organised return to work to the indefinite strike proposed by the other councils of Budapest. This caused verbal confrontations within the CWC. Another position was that of a return to work but on condition that the last Russian soldier had left Hungary. Even within the council of the industrial complex, opinions were far from being unanimous, as József Bácsi explained. Thus at the motorbike factory (Pannónia brand) and at the steelworks, the workers were the most hostile to a return to work, which is explained by the fact, according to Bácsi, that in these two factories the repressive apparatus and the management were, before October, the hardest and that there was a really tight regime there. In addition, like in other factories in Budapest, one of the first measures of the factory councils of Csepel was closing the Personnel Department and burning its archives.

After 4 November the strike started up again and continued even as the Russian tanks entered the streets of the industrial complex. During the creation of the CWC, on 14 November, József Dévényi of Csepel was elected president. Quickly he was sacked for being considered too conciliatory towards Kádár. But in fact, according to Elek Nagy and József Bácsi, he had not been mandated by the council of Csepel – this increased misunderstandings between the CWC and the Council of Csepel.

On 21 November, while the Russians stopped the meeting of the CWC at the Sports Palace, it proclaimed a 48-hour strike. Despite Csepel following this, Elek Nagy and the Central Council of Csepel put forward a negative judgement on this strike as “*a heavy weapon which must be used with more prudence*” and appealed to re-elect the delegates to the CWC so as to take account of these divergences.

The same oppositions occurred during the appeal for the general strike from 11 to 12 December launched by the CWC and also opposed by the council de Csepel. But the strike took place at Csepel and was well maintained because, in the meantime, the police had fired on a demonstration of miners at Salgótarján.

After the arrest of the members of the CWC on the 14 December, the council of Csepel demanded their release, in vain. But Kádár still waited to give the *coup de grace* to the councils of Csepel, blowing hot and cold. Realising the defeat, that is to say the impossibility of continuing an autonomous existence while continuing to discuss with Kádár, the council of the industrial complex of Csepel and the councils of the 18 factories constituting it dissolved themselves on 8 January 1957.

During a meeting in the factory on 11 January a young worker was killed by a guard. Immediately, the strike was total and barricades went up in the factory. The security forces called by the management arrived and swept away the barricades with machine guns. “*It was a desperate battle*”, recalls József Bácsi.

### **Telefongyár**

For this factory of 3000 workers which made telephone equipment, in the Fourteenth District, we make use of the testimony of Ferenc Töke<sup>38</sup>, timekeeper, factory delegate then vice-president of the CWC. The council was created on 25 October by an assembly of 800 workers. The Workers'

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<sup>38</sup> Testimony already cited. Töke, born in 1930, was a social democrat militant in 1946 then in the CP in 1949.

Council thus elected comprised around 25 members. The Workers' Council was set up in such a way that, apart from its president and its secretary, it did not have any permanent member. Each department of the factory elected two or three of them. In total, 19 of the members of the council were manual workers. Around 50% of the members of the Workers' Council were young, from 23 to 28 years. *"They had participated in various revolutionary actions, in demonstrations, in tearing down the statue of Stalin, in fighting in front of the Radio, etc. By their stature and their revolutionary spirit, they had succeeded in carrying forward the labourers in the factory."* What's more, 90% of the members of the council belonged to the Party and many among them had been active militants. *"But the workers had confidence in them, because they knew that they had always defended their interests. They were irrefragable in everything that was asked of them "*

### **The workers' council of the Borsod district administration**

This was constituted on 25 October 1956 at Miskolc in the office of the district administration ("comitat") under the leadership of Miklós Papp and Attila Nagy, while Rudolf Földvári<sup>39</sup> and the delegation from the factory of Dimávag were in talks with Imre Nagy in Budapest. The founding meeting in the neighbourhood of the town university immediately supported the strike. It decided to establish a workers' guard of 150 men to reinforce public security, and encouraged the establishment of workers' councils in the factories. In consequence, the workers' councils assured the functioning of the factories and many municipalities in the district administration of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén during the following days.

After seizing the headquarters of the police on 26 October, the Workers' Council of the district administration set itself up in the local offices of the council of the district administration, an action symbolising the taking of power by the revolutionary forces. Although the Workers' Council had immediately begun to organise its security forces, it was not able to prevent a violent demonstration on 27 October against the AVO which was organised spontaneously by the population.

The Workers' Council controlled the administration of the comitat and adopted the 21 points of the workers as its programme. On 5 November, the Workers' Council took part in sterile negotiations with the commanders of the Soviet forces occupying the town. All its members were arrested and deported to sub-Carpathian Ukraine, behind the Soviet frontier. The rule of the Stalinist Party was re-established under the iron rod of Károly Grósz<sup>40</sup> However, the continuing strike made the Stalinist Party retreat: arrested members of the Workers' Council were freed in mid-November some even integrated into the functioning of the town and the factory council, but finally, on 9 December, the council was dissolved.

## **The military question**

### **General overview**

The first battles began during the night of 23-24 October after the first fusillade in front of the Radio Station. Quickly the insurgents armed themselves and engaged in combat with the AVO and then with the Russian army on its arrival on 24 October. Where did the arms come from? There were three places:

- The arms handed over by the police or the army,

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<sup>39</sup> Földvári was the secretary of the Party for the town of Miskolc. He was a reformer within the Stalinist Party.

<sup>40</sup> Who became Prime Minister in 1987-8 and the last General Secretary of the Stalinist Party in 1989-90.

- The arms provided by the workers from the armaments factories of Csepel,
- The arms taken from the depots of the MOHOSZ<sup>41</sup>, in the Second, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, Fourteenth and Twentieth Districts and in some factories (such as Gamma, in the Eleventh District).

The Russian troops stationed in Hungary attacked Budapest from various directions with the objective of keeping open the bridges on the Danube and the roads leading to them, because at that time the bridges of Budapest were almost the only ones on the Danube linking the West and the East of Hungary.

This explains the localities of the principle combat zones:

- In Buda
- The Széna tér to the west,
- The Móricz Zsigmond körtér to the south,
- In Pest
- Újpest in the north,
- The area around the West station (Keleti pályaudvar) in the eastern centre,
- Kőbánya to the east,
- The junction of Üllői út and Ferenc körút/József körút in the south-west (Corvin Cinema and the Killián barracks, Tűzoltó utca)
- Kispest to the south-west (around the Vörös Csillág tractor factory),
- Ferencváros (around the station) and Pesterzsébet (around Határ út) in the south,
- Finally, Csepel.

These same zones were the theatre of desperate confrontations during the second Russian attack on 4 November.

The battles were entirely spontaneous and the same goes for the organisation of the combatants. There was in effect no coordination, even after several days of fighting, either between the groups or on the level of the city. The insurgents organised defence around points of regroupment, such as the Corvin cinema and the Killián barracks or Széna tér, in Buda, (here it was really closely around the Ganz Electric factory that the fighters gathered. The workers were able to rest in the factory before setting out to fight again).

### **Budapest**

The Széna tér group:

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<sup>41</sup> MOHOSZ: “*Magyar Országos Horgász Szövetség hivatalos honlapja*” Hungarian Association of Volunteers for national Defence. An organisation for training youth in the handling of weapons which included depots and firing ranges. In general, there was one for each district of Budapest.

In fact the combat zones, around the core of Moszkva tér/Széna tér (the two squares are contiguous) extended from Margit híd (to the north-east of Széna tér) to the South station (to the south of Moscow square) which is more than 2 km. The points of support for the combatants were the Ganz electric factory (the factory employed 4000 workers) and a barracks of the AVH occupied by the insurgents, Maros utca.

As one 19-year old worker combatant recalled<sup>42</sup>: *“No one asked why you came or went. They gave out arms to whoever wanted to fight. When the person was tired she left her combat position and went home keeping her weapon or not. Everything rested on commitment and confidence. There was no organisation”*

According to eye-witness accounts there were up to 2000 combatants. The fighting started on 24 October and lasted until 29 October, then from 4 to 7 November. It was insurgents against Russian tanks. In the first phase, the insurgents played on a level field with the Russians (there were no definite lines of combat but an incessant movement of advances and retreats), during the second, on the other hand, the insurgents were faced with a disproportionate amount of force and were rapidly reduced to sporadic engagements. In the first week the insurgents were also opposed to attempts by the Hungarian army to make them hand over their arms.

According to another combatant<sup>43</sup>, the typical ideology of the combatants was a *“Yugoslav-style socialism<sup>44</sup> plus the workers’ councils”*. Nevertheless, the figure who emerged as the leader of the street fighters was János Szabó, a state delivery driver born in 1897, combatant of the red army during the revolution of 1919, sergeant in the Hungarian army later on, militant of the CP between 1945 and 1948, who spent several months in prison afterwards and who professed an anti-Stalinist internationalism: *“The Russian soldiers that we kill are as much heroes as we are. It is the crime of the leaders which makes us fight against each other”*

Arrested, he was sentenced to death on 19 January 1957 and executed.

The Móricz Zsigmond körtér group:

An important junction controlling the routes to the south of Buda, this roundabout was the site of other battles which regrouped Hungarian civilians and soldiers against the Russian troops. Here as well the combatants had no permanent organisation and numbered 300. The fighting was at the lowest intensity between 25 and 29 October (often the combatants just watched without firing and leaflets were distributed to the Russian soldiers) but, on the other hand, it was very violent on 4 and 5 November, when 140 Russian soldiers were killed or wounded. Nevertheless, from 6 November, the Russians had control of the roundabout.

The Tűzoltó utca group:

This street parallel to Üllői út, behind the Kilián barracks, in the workers’ neighbourhood of Ferencváros, was the site of activity of a group of fighters who were able to operate behind the lines of the Russian troops attacking the Kilián barracks and the Corvin passage, thanks to a network of cellars. Like many street fighting groups, it was formed spontaneously but it is worth drawing attention to the personalities of its “leaders”<sup>45</sup>: István Angyal and Per Olaf Csongovai who gave it a clear anti-Stalinist orientation which was shared by the fighters, quite

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<sup>42</sup> Erzsébet Marton. Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> Jenő Fónay. Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> At the time the Stalinist regime in Yugoslavia, led by Tito, put forward a self-management of the factories by the workers. Of course, it was a farce.

<sup>45</sup> Csongovai, in Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 230, explains that they were not leaders elected by the group of combatants but people selected, day to day, for their ability.

simply because none of them wanted a return to the factories as private property, to the situation before 1948.

Angyal, born in 1928 and a survivor of Auschwitz, was a technician non-militant of the CP but, having participated in the Petöfi circle, he hoisted the red flag on 7 November to salute the anniversary of the October Revolution. As for Csongovai, born in 1930, a CP militant, a cinema vision engineer, he was a partisan of the workers' councils in the line of the factory committees of Petrograd in 1917 or Spain in 1936.

This group also comprised one Russian and twenty or so conscripts of the AVH who had joined the insurrection. One of their political limits is that they thought they could obtain an honest cease-fire with the Russians. Angyal was arrested on 16 November at the hospital on Péterfy Street, tried in April 1958, condemned to death and executed on 1 December 1958. Csongovai managed to flee to the West.

The Corvin cinema:

Situated in a passage parallel to Üllői út, perpendicular to József körút on the other side of Kilián barracks, this cinema constituted an ideal place for street fighting, sheltered by surrounding buildings and surrounded by alleyways, and bordered at the back by a school in Práter utca which became its fallback position. On 25 October there was a small spontaneous group of 50 fighters, led<sup>46</sup> by László Iván Kovács, who occupied the place when the fighting started. On 28 October, the group grew to 800 combatants and on 29 October, to between 1000 and 1200<sup>47</sup>.

The Stalinists tried to sully the name of these fighters by accusing them of being "lumpen criminals". In fact, according to analyses<sup>48</sup>, the group was composed of 90% workers of whom 30% had a qualification. 30% had been in trouble with the law, half for reasons of simple criminal law. So what? Their desire for revenge cannot be denied, but nor can their willingness to participate in combat without restraint. Numerous Roma, freed after 25 October, participated actively in the fighting, an example was Sándor Csányi who was arrested at the end of 1956, condemned and executed in 1959<sup>49</sup>.

In general the fighters were young. The other leader, Gergely Pongrátz, was 24, and Kovács was 26, but most were 20 and even less. Whatever they were, the fighters showed an enormous courage during the fighting against the Russian tanks and made very effective use of Molotov cocktails. Although this group was one of the most celebrated it was also one of the least politicised, but this didn't prevent some passionate discussions<sup>50</sup>.

Divergences of views also ended up with the eviction of Kovács on 1 November because he was considered "*too left-wing*" and his replacement by Pongrátz. But in fact the disagreement rested on whether or not to support the accord with Maléter, Pongrátz being one of its firm opponents. If the fighters were aggressive towards the AVH, they were more indulgent towards the Russian soldier prisoners who, if they did not wish to remain neutral, were escorted to the Russian embassy.

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<sup>46</sup> That is to say organised by a leader selected and not elected.

<sup>47</sup> What rapidly imposed itself on the insurgents was the need to specialise and organise themselves seriously. Thus the Práter utca school became a "factory" for making molotov cocktails which functioned continuously.

<sup>48</sup> That of László Eörsi "*Corvinisták*" Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 200.

<sup>49</sup> Csányi (1929-1959) Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 330.

<sup>50</sup> Andy Anderson, in *Hungary 1956*, on p. 83, recounts the anecdote about how the combatants were so taken up in their discussion that they didn't notice two Russian tanks arriving 20 metres away!



As in other places in Budapest, the fighters had had a fair chance against the Russians during the first week but things changed after the 4 November when the Üllői út/József körút junction became of prime strategic importance and had to be crushed. In two days the fighters were overwhelmed by sheer numbers[52].

The Kilián barracks:

Situated at the junction of Üllői út and Ferenc körút (therefore opposite the Corvin cinema), the Kilián barracks was the headquarters of the army corps of auxiliary engineers (1000 soldiers) and commanded by colonel Pál Maléter. On the night of 23 October, some insurgents came to demand arms and 300 soldiers followed them into battle in front of the Radio station which was not far away. Following this other insurgents occupied the barracks.

On 25 October, Maléter, with five T34 tanks, decided to take back “his” barracks. When this reoccupation turned into confrontation on 28 October, Maléter got out of his tank and was acclaimed by the insurgents “*The army is with us!*” So he passed officially on to the side of the insurrection with his five tanks. The newspapers of the time, foreign as well as Hungarian, made out that the Kilián barracks and Pál Maléter were the nerve centre of the insurrection, although they were no more this than anyone else.

The promotion of Pál Maléter in the government had the objective of using his prestige to make the insurgents hand over their arms. During the meeting on 31 October<sup>51</sup>, at the Kilián barracks, the proposals of Maléter for the integration of the insurgents into the army, received a cold reception from the people present, Pongráz being one of his firmest opponents.

His capture during the 3 November negotiations with the Russians and his execution in June 1958, contributes to his legend. As for the insurgents of the Kilián barracks, they were subjected to a deluge of fire on 4 November and had to escape from a barracks in ruins.

Csepel:

If the workers had given out arms to the street fighters of the Radio Station on the night of 23 October, the fighting at Csepel itself began on the 24th in the morning when a group of demonstrators attacked an army recruiting centre, occupied the police station, destroyed the office of the Party (in front of the industrial complex) and seized the arms that were there.

Starting on 26 October, the fighting was between insurgents and units of the Hungarian army reinforced by 40 AVO who retook the police station on the 28th. The neighbourhood became calm after 31 October but erupted again during the second Russian intervention. The centre of the area was bombarded from the Gellért hill by the Russians. This time the confrontation was between workers reinforced by groups of soldiers, on one side, and the Russian troops on the other. Better equipped, the insurgents destroyed two Russian planes on 6 November. On 9 November the Russians launched the final assault with reinforced troops and equipment. Despite the determination of the insurgents, that evening order reigned on the streets of Csepel.

### **A preliminary balance sheet**

How many combatants were engaged in fighting, whether against the AVO, units of the Hungarian army or against the Russians, during the two weeks of confrontations?

Around 30,000 in Budapest and 10,000 in the provinces, which doesn't mean that there were 40,000 permanent fighters.

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<sup>51</sup> Present were Sándor Kopacsi, János Szabó and representatives of various combat groups and factory councils.

The number of dead in the first week amongst the insurgents (but including also civilians killed without being involved in the fighting) reached 2700<sup>52</sup>. In total, there were around 20,000 deaths and more than 2500 Russian soldiers killed in combat.

The consequences of the repression were:

500 death sentences, of which 350 were carried out. Among those executed, 229 were condemned for participation in fighting and the rest, 121, for “crimes”; three quarters of those condemned were young, workers in their 20s.

35,000 people were arrested of which 26,000 were tried and 22,000 condemned to various punishments, of which 11,000 received more than 5 years in prison. In 1963 the majority of the prisoners were freed in an amnesty.

This repression was very selective. It was the leaders of the fighting groups, then the fighters themselves who were the first to be condemned to death, even more so if they had been at some point militants of the CP. On the other hand, the leaders of the factory councils “enjoyed” prison sentences from 10 to 20 years.

To this we should add the emigration of 170,000 people who went to Austria and of 20,000 to Yugoslavia.

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<sup>52</sup> Bob Dent, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

# ANALYSIS

## Programme and practice of the CWCGB

Before analysing and criticising the programme and the practice of the CWC, it is necessary to set out the social framework in which the CWC existed: that of the Eastern bloc countries in the days of triumphant Stalinism, because no social movement social begins for an absolute ideal but always from really existing social conditions.

If Capital is one thing, the forms of organisation and domination of capitalist societies are different. The weight of feudalism persisted, for example, in Germany in the nineteenth century and in Japan feudal organisation continued after 1868 in the organisation of large businesses.

In the era of Russian influence after the Second World War the ideology of Stalinism proclaimed that the workers were the masters of society and that socialism was in the course of being realised. The workers of Hungary, in 1956, attempted to sweep away the bureaucracy and wanted to practically realise the fact that "*they were the masters*". But this being the case, they remained (even if we take account of the weak periods when they managed to put into practice what they wanted from 23 October to 14 December 1956) on the terrain of bureaucracy, that of the management of production.

The positive aspect was this: they refused to be managed by the bureaucracy and organised themselves to collectively manage life within the framework of society. But the negative aspect can be found in the same place and at the same moment: to refuse to be led by the bureaucracy, is on one side not to criticise the relation between leaders and led and, on the other, is to reduce class relations, the analysis of capitalism, to just the relation of leaders and led.

The paradox of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 is that it was at the same time at the end of a proletarian cycle, that of 1917-21 marked by the theoretical weight of revolution as workers' management and also at the beginning of the following cycle, that of 1968-76, shaking the Stalinist bloc in the process.

The capitalist organisation in the Eastern bloc countries was a weak organisation, because it did not know how to feed itself on conflicts like the societies of the West did. It therefore used force, by the methods which had proved themselves in Stalin's purges, to assure the renewal of fractions of the dominant classes, to decide the choices of development (within the limits of the capitalist relation) or to assure social advancement.

Because it incarnated the refusal of any evolution, offering no alternative to itself, because it dominated countries which hadn't known much bourgeois democracy (with the exception of East Germany or Czechoslovakia between the wars), the bureaucracy naturally led those who criticised it to demand rights, guarantees and control over the management of society. In this way it "maintained" the proletariat within the limits reached during the preceding revolutionary wave.

But in 1956, the workers of Hungary had already gone further. Starting out by revealing practically the class nature of the societies of the Eastern bloc, that is to say capitalist societies where

the bureaucracy was the exploiting class and the proletariat the exploited class, they were at the origin of the groundswell which would end up 35 years later in the fall of the wall and the collapse of the USSR. Then, the workers of Hungary, in the extremely difficult conditions which they were in, posed another problem: how to centralise, to organise human activities? The time was lacking for them to go further. The military intervention and the question of survival “congealed” their thought.

Certainly, if the survival of the councils had been possible for a longer time, a decantation would have occurred within the councils. Probably, the majority would have leaned towards an organisation something like Solidarność 25 years later, while a minority would become radicalised.

Let's go back to the programme of the CWC.

The project for the organisation of society is divided into three levels:

- That of the enterprise, where it is necessary for the unions to defend the rights and interests of workers and to enjoy the right to strike,
- But for what the workers consider to be “beyond the problems of each factory”, they organise themselves in workers' councils federated locally and then nationally, where they decide on the orientation and choices of production,
- Finally, there exists a Parliament where the parties (and not only workers' parties) sit, whose representatives are elected by universal suffrage.

According to the testimony of Töke:

*“We thought that, on a general level, the role of the workers' councils would be to manage production, to take possession of the factories for the workers and to create conditions in which the Workers' Council would be able to function independently of any other organisation, whether it was the government, a party or a union.*

We hoped that the regime, once consolidated, would be able to institute a political system based on two Chambers; the first, the legislative, would take on the political leadership of the country; the second would be concerned with the economy and the interests of the working class. The members of the second Chamber would be elected from amongst the producers, that is to say from workers' councils, on the basis of democratic elections. Our intention was not to claim a political role for the workers' councils. We thought generally that in the same way that there had to be specialists in the running of the economy, the political leadership also had to be taken on by experts. On the other hand, we wanted to control ourselves everything which concerned us”

The same person on the relations envisaged between unions and councils:

*“The unions would have the task of defending the workers on the national level, against the government if need be, and against the workers' councils themselves if, by chance, they should be in contradiction with the workers' interests. Despite everything, unions and workers' councils had to collaborate as far as possible, even when their immediate interests on the level of production are not always in agreements ”*

Finally, on the separation of roles:

*“No one suggested that the workers' councils themselves could be the political representation of the workers. Those who perfectly took account of the enterprise, and thus of the employer, could*

not represent their political interests. Wasn't the most absurd trait of the system which was to be overthrown precisely that the employer was at the same time the representative of the workers? Certainly, as I want to say, the Workers' Council had to fulfil certain political functions, because it was opposed to a regime and the workers had no other representation, but in the spirit of the workers this was a provisional title"<sup>1</sup>

According to Sándor Bali, as well:

*"It is the Hungarian working class which set up the workers' councils, which were, for the moment, the economic and political organisations which had the working class behind them... We know very well that the workers' councils could not have been political organisations. You should understand that we clearly realised the necessity of having a political party and a union. But, given that for the moment we did not have the practical possibility of setting up these organisations, we were forced to concentrate all our forces in one place while waiting for the outcome of events. We must not and we cannot speak of unions before the Hungarian workers have formed unions from the base up and they have been given the right to strike... We knew that the workers' councils had to become managerial organs of the economy of the country, and that is exactly what we wanted them to be"*<sup>2</sup>

And finally, for Miklós Sebestyén:

*"But we understood at the same time that we would have to give in on some of our initial absolute demands in some way because, after 4 November, it was no longer possible to defend the objectives of the revolution in their entirety. We had to look for a compromise: to snatch concessions from the government and fulfil the trust of the workers. [...] That is why our most important day to day tasks consisted in looking into the fate of the abandoned population. [...] But at the same time we could not forget that our most important duty was of a political nature and that, if we are not to abandon the population, it would be a serious act of negligence on our part to lose the view of the political demands of the workers that we represent and in general those of the revolution; we sort to make them succeed as far as possible. Our main concern was knowing which demands we had to address to the government, in the hope that they would accept them in whole or at least in part. However, given that the population and the working class in its entirety, resolutely demanded the immediate or at least quick as possible withdrawal of Soviet troops, free elections with the participation of several parties, the return of Imre Nagy to the presidency of the government, it was very difficult to present demands of this sort so that they could be reconciled with the political facts"*<sup>3</sup>

## Why Hungary and not Poland?

Why did the Stalinist bureaucracy choose to crush Hungary and not Poland? There are various reasons that we will see and which enable us to clarify the strength of the workers' insurrection in Hungary.

In Poland, the reformist fraction led by Gomułka had swept away the Stalinists of Bierut (what's more, this was decided in July 1956 and the successor, Ochab, was at least timid). This fraction was present throughout the apparatus of the CP down to the base via all the intermedi-

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<sup>1</sup> Ferenc Töke, *Ce que furent les conseils ouvriers Hungariens* in *Pologne Hongrie* 56 op. cit., p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> Sándor Bali in *Pologne Hongrie* 56, op. cit., p. 286-287.

<sup>3</sup> Miklós Sebestyén, *Mes expériences dans le conseil central ouvrier du grand Budapest* in *Pologne Hongrie* 56 op. cit., pp. 298-299.

ate layers and enjoyed the support of the population and the temporary indulgence of sectors of the workers who had begun to struggle in the summer of 1956.

In Hungary in October 1956, the CP was always led by the “hard-liners”, the fraction around Gerö. But this was on the way down because it had not made any clear choices which could allow it to compensate for the lack of a social base. It oscillated between immobility and *laissez-faire*; a *laissez-faire* attitude which intensified. In effect, it was a very weak Stalinist dictatorship which allowed meetings of the Pétöfi circle of several thousand people in the middle of Budapest. This regime organised national funerals for Rajk and others shot (by the regime) in 1949, funerals which degenerated into demonstrations of hostility towards it, of 100,000 people! These oscillations continued up until the fateful 23 October when demonstrations were banned and then authorised. The only one who resembled Gomulka, Nagy, who had been side-lined since February 1955, retired from active political life and contented himself with being visited by oppositionists at his villa in Buda.

But for the Russian leaders the warning lights were flashing. The agitation which was intensifying since the funeral of Rajk made them worried that it might also produce agitation in Poland. Therefore the decision was taken on 20 October to activate the troops in Ukraine close to the Hungarian border, along with those in Hungary itself, the next day. The Russian bureaucracy was ready for any eventuality, even if its principal problem was still Poland.

When the demonstrations of 23 October got going the Russian tanks were ready. If the Stalinist leaders of Hungary were overwhelmed, it was not the case with the Russians. After the events at the radio station and the arming of the population, the Kremlin gave orders for the tanks to intervene in Budapest.

Events rushed forwards and the Russians were overwhelmed by the resistance of the fighters in the first few exchanges and by the scale of the general strike. On the night of 23 to 24 October, the workers and the students were armed (with arms given or taken from the police, arms distributed by the workers at the Csepel Arsenal, etc.) and even though the armed struggle was not centralised the insurgents knew how to stand up to the Russian tanks and soldiers and destroy the AVO, the sinister political police.

What’s more, from the 24 October the CP, which still had 600,000 members the day before, literally imploded and no longer existed. The Stalinist leaders went into exile in Russia, under the instructions of Souslov and Mikoïan, their Russian plenipotentiaries; the others went into hiding. There was no alternative leadership that would have any influence in the population. The “neo-reformers” (Kádár, Marosán) represented no one but themselves. What’s more, an important part of the army (Maléter, Király) and the police of Budapest (Kopacsi) had gone over to the insurrection.

An aggravating circumstance was that from 25 October not only did some Russian soldiers remain neutral during some of the confrontations but there were others who deserted or passed wholeheartedly onto the side of the insurrection. Troops stationed in Hungary for at least three years knew the conditions of life of the population and did not believe that the insurrection was a “*fascist plot*”, as the Stalinist characterisation would have it.

Without ever being massive, the simple desertions or active passages to the side of the insurrection were worrying. It should be noted it was principally “non-Russians” soldiers who were doing this. Even today, Russian sources give figures of between 67 and 220 soldiers identified<sup>4</sup> as

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<sup>4</sup> Because their families had been arrested in reprisals in the URSS.

having joined the insurrection and up to 2200 shot in the courtyard of the Russian embassy for refusing to fight<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, the simple balance of forces (Poland has three times more people than Hungary) was against the Hungarian insurgents while the international context (the Suez affair and the tacit agreement with the Americans) was hardly favourable to them, even if the Western powers had truly wanted to support the insurrection. In fact, they would have been able to support the moderate attempt by Imre Nagy to progressively leave the Warsaw Pact, but not a workers' insurrection.

Having understood the danger represented by the movement, and believing in its subversive potential more than the insurgents themselves did, the Russian bureaucracy sent Souslov and Mikoïan to Budapest on the evening of 24 October to take stock of the situation with help of Andropov, the ambassador from July 1954 to March 1957<sup>6</sup>. They sacked Gerö, confirmed some Stalinists, notably Kádár, as leaders of the rest of the Party, understood that Nagy, even if was no revolutionary, could not be their agent, and decided to lay for time so as to prepare the second wave of repression from 4 to 7 November.

Even after crushing the insurrection, the Russians military, Grebennik<sup>7</sup>, and political, Andropov, representatives noticed the lack of substance of Kádár and Marosán and continued to discuss and play for time with the representatives of the Central Workers' Council. But time was against them and the workers and the CWC could not maintain an independent existence after 14 December (the date of the dissolution of the CWC and the arrest of its principal members).

Finally we have to add the factor of the isolation that the insurgents suffered in the decisive period of 4 to 7 November, which favoured the Russian decision. We are not talking here about the abandonment of Hungary by the western countries – they would have feared a workers' victory against the Russian bureaucracy – but the isolation in regard to the workers of the other Easter bloc countries.

## The military question

What are the assessments and lessons that we can draw from the Hungarian insurrection?

The first thing to note is the complete separation between the military struggle and the workers' struggle, even though the majority of participants were workers and the level of violence in the conflicts was sporadic. In fact, apart from on the first three days, the majority of workers, while remaining armed, "re-entered" the factories.

On the side of the street fighters, the total spontaneity of engagement and organisation encouraged a localism of the neighbourhood and the street. If this helped them to hang on during the first wave of fighting it reinforced the impossibility of resisting during the second. But, as the few examples we've shown indicate, the fighters continued to reflect on and think about their actions all the more easily because they were removed from a certain formalism of discussion which reigned in the workers' councils. From the councils more "radical" political positions emerged, such as Trotskyism, represented by the *Független Szocialista Szövetség* (Independent

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<sup>5</sup> Bob Dent, op. cit., p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> Also with the advice of Ivan Serov, representative of the KGB, and the Commander in Chief of the Russian troops in Hungary, Mikhail Malinin.

<sup>7</sup> Grebennik was however considered too conciliatory towards the CWC and was recalled to Moscow at the beginning of December and replaced by the chief of the secret police, General Ivan Serov.

Socialist League), far removed from the democratic formalism which constituted the typical ideology of the councils.

To return to the military question and its centralisation, we need to recall, in defence of the workers of Hungary, that this question has been just as little or badly resolved in other places and times. Secondly, even if the workers constituted the majority of civilian fighters (but without a particular programme on the question), the totality of forces ranged against the Russians was more heterogeneous. And it is difficult to see how a centralisation could be put in place, other than under the control of the two military tendencies (those of Maléter and Király) who wanted to control the insurgents. The reaction of the insurgents to these attempts, whatever their political preferences were, as can be seen by the debates taking place on 31 October in the Kilián barracks between Pongrátz and Maléter, was to viscerally oppose them. But, of course, the consequences of the second Russian intervention made this question disappear as the order of the day.

On one side, the intensifying creation of councils from the factory, to the district, the city and the country (the CWC of Budapest connected with the towns of the provinces and was *de facto* a national Workers' Council) translated itself into a re-enforcement of general workers' organisation and a corresponding disinterest in the military question. One plausible explanation is that the worker combatants were most often young and unskilled, while the organisers of the councils were often older but above all more qualified, and therefore more inclined to reflect on and to want to limit the damage which had already been done during the first days when the second Russian intervention happened.

On the other hand, the disproportion of forces, and above all supplies, in favour of the Russians prevented any reason for combat other than desperation. The destruction unleashed by the Russians for three days on the buildings of Budapest bears witness to this. This was as important as during the weeks of fighting between Russian and German troops in 1944-45.

## **The awareness of a necessary retreat**

What distinguishes the Hungarian events from other similar events is the conservation of a reformist workers' organisation, created in less than 20 days, using revolutionary means to struggle against the capitalist class and which did not betray the workers after the military defeat that we can see took place at the end of the second wave of fighting against the Russian army, that is to say on 7 November. The CWC was a reformist organisation, in the sense of effectively reforming society so as to improve the workers' conditions.

Contrary to what vulgar extremists say, the revolutionary proletariat has used the tool of reforms, during a phase which is now past, during its long trajectory towards its liberation. But their adoption, their handling and their finality have nothing in common with those people today who present themselves as inheritors of that glorious tradition: social-democracy, Stalinism naturally, but also Third Worldist statism. The Hungarian example is at the very end of that past phase of the proletarian political cycle. This does not prevent workers' reformism being able to re-emerge and it has already re-emerged in Poland with Solidarność, as well as in South Africa with NUM-Cosatu, South Korea with the KCTU or in Brazil with the CUB. But in these cases, if workers' reformism expresses itself, it has only had the choice of integration into the state in the trade union form.



While in other historical examples of a strong workers' movement which attains this level of violence, we see the almost total collapse of any important autonomous proletarian organisation after the military defeat (of greater or lesser intensity) - cf. the Paris Commune, Germany in the 1920s, the IWW the US after 1919, or Italy after 1977, or even to some extent Czechoslovakia after 1969 -, the CWC pursued its activity up until mid-December 56. In Hungary, the organisation consolidated itself and centralised itself after the military defeat.

The workers "negotiated" the retreat well. First of all, the military defeat was not, in itself, a crushing defeat (the reported number of dead out of the number of combatants is very small in comparison with the other historical examples, in particular with the Paris Commune, an event which it resembles in terms of the geographic spread of the combat zones). Secondly, it shows that the strength of the workers' movement exceeds that of just armed struggle, particularly in unfavourable conditions. The struggles changed terrain, lowering the intensity but remaining quite centralised (perhaps more than during the fighting). They gained time, allowing workers to continue their collective theoretical elaboration and preparing their retreat. Looking at the military situation, it was already extraordinary. What's more we've got to stress the objective conditions. Isolated from the proletarians of other countries, defeated militarily, surrounded by 200,000 soldiers and 6000 tanks, what else could they have done?

Seen in context, the negotiations entered into after 14 November were not just a game for dupes. Above all there was the fashion in which they were conducted. Each encounter between the representatives of the CWC and Kádár started with the preamble "*we do not recognise your government*" and a list of demands for the freeing of prisoners and the withdrawal of the Russians. On his side, Kádár declared that he "*refused the reality of the councils*" and that he was "*supported by Russian tanks*" In conclusion, there was no point in negotiations.

Secondly (and in parallel) the councils decided to negotiate with the Russians. Here also, apart from the demands for the freeing of imprisoned workers, or strikes to free them (in the case of Rácz and Bali arrested in the Beloianisz factory on 2 December), there were no negotiations. The activity of the councils after 14 November cannot be reduced to the systematic search for meetings with Kádár.

It was just as much Kádár, isolated behind the Russian troops and who had to restart a paralysed economy, who was putting forward demands. We must not forget that once all military action is impossible, the councils are obliged to negotiate or try to negotiate with their boss, the state, whose representative is Kádár.

On the other hand, the time which Kádár spent pretending to discuss could be used to weigh up the balance of forces within the CWC, to spread false rumours<sup>8</sup>, to divide, to put pressure on the hesitant elements and prepare the final repression. Thus the complex of Csepel with its 18 factories and its 40,000 workers was only attacked on 11 January 1957. But the Central Council of Csepel had already clearly dissolved itself on 8 January 1957.

The aim of the councils was to guard the cohesion of the movement despite the disagreements which can be explained by the varied situations (miners as opposed to labourers from Budapest, for example). The necessity of not letting go on any point, of not "betraying" and of dissolving when it could be seen that there was no longer anything to defend was what guided its policy. The CWC is a rare example of a workers' organisation which understood the defeat, tried everything to maintain itself and then dissolved when there was nothing more to be done.

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<sup>8</sup> Several times the Kádár government published fake versions of the CWC paper, *Munkásújság*.

*"I have a clear conscience, because I was the unfortunate interpreter of the will of the workers and of those who were fighting for the ideal of a free Hungary, independent and neutral, and for a socialist state... All that was refused us. The government knew it did not have the country with it, and taking account of the fact that today the only organised force which can really make the revolution is the working class, it wanted to dismantle the workers' front"*

- Declaration of Sándor Rácz, 8 December 1956.

## **Apogee and decline of workers' reformism**

We can outline various complementary critiques of the political nature of the Hungarian revolution.

The common point (of all the forms of workers' expression of the time, from the street fighting groups to the councils and their various tendencies) of the revolution in Hungary was a true reformist programme put forward and starting out in rough form from the workers' councils. Behind expressions such as *"The time when management decide in our place is over"*, *"a Yugoslav-style socialism plus the workers' councils"*, *"no return to private property of the factories"*, etc. there is expressed the desire to realise practically what had been the official ideology since 1948, to correct the excesses of Stalinism (identified with socialism because of state property in the means of production) by bringing about the control of the factories and society by the workers.

Unfortunately, every aspect of factory management, of workers' control furiously evokes the well known tune of Trotsky's *"Transitional Programme"*. Furthermore, Trotskyists (such as P. Broué) have not had anything bad to say about it, other than that the political leadership which was lacking for a successful insurrection in 1956 was theirs. They correspond perfectly to the political limits expressed by the CWC, at least during a certain time.

For sure we obviously don't think that there was a miracle solution, quite the opposite.

To this we should add the incomprehension, on the part of the councils, that the communist revolution is not a matter of managing existing society but of going beyond it. You can find no trace in the programme of the councils of a radical critique of the process of labour, of technology and of science as they are fashioned by capitalism. In this framework, the role of experts is not called into question. It is enough just that they should be controlled by the factory councils. This is for sure the limit of the experience of 1956, but it is also the limit of the whole workers' movement of that epoch and it is still practically the limit today.

Finally, let's note that if there was no political workers' organisation prior to the insurrection, there was none after it, neither in Hungary, nor in the migrant community. Various factors can explain this. The principal one is, in the early days, repression (death sentences, prison sentences from 5 years to life – for Rácz, for example – which concerned more than 11,000 people, mostly the workers and those who had been leaders of the councils) and immigration for the luckier ones, which cut off the generation of 1956 from the rest of the class.

In 1963, Kádár amnestied almost all those condemned in 1956. He had established the power of the bureaucracy and with the help of reforms (*"Goulash socialism"*) and above all the industrial development of some sectors capable of exporting on the world market outside Comecon (food processing, pharmaceuticals, railways, defence electronics), he could offer a relative social peace. If the workers wanted to become consumers outside it, inside the factory they became

new prisoners of norms, of piece rates and the authority of the Party relaying its orders through the unions.

The organisation which existed in Hungary before 1956 and in a very diffuse fashion amalgamated the various workers' generations since that of 1919, has disappeared<sup>9</sup> after affirming itself on its glorious day from 23 October to mid-December. Everything has to start again....

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<sup>9</sup> Attempts at political regroupment did not succeed even if, once freed, many of the workers who acted in 1956, once back at work, began to meet again.

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First of all we recommend the site of The institute for the history of the 1956 hungarian revolution ([www.rev.hu](http://www.rev.hu)) which, even if only a quarter of the texts are translated into English, constitutes a mine of information on the fighting groups and the actions of the workers' councils

with interviews (in Hungarian for the most part) with several hundred people and biographical details.

Eörsi László Corvinisták 1956/ 1956 Institute, Budapest, 2001.

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[52] Kovács (1930-1957) hid after November but began an illegal activity in February 1957, distributing leaflets to found a political group whose objective was to help Maléter escape and start up the armed struggle again. He was arrested on 12 March, tried on 22 August and shot on 30 December 1957. Pongrátz (1932-2005) succeeded in fleeing to the US.

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