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# One Day That Shook the Communist World

The 1956 Hungarian Uprising  
and Its Legacy

PAUL LENDVAI



PRINCETON

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THE 1956 HUNGARIAN UPRISING AND  
ITS LEGACY

Paul Lendvai

*Translated by Ann Major*

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In memory of Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter,  
Géza Losonczy, József Szilágyi,  
Miklós Gimes, and all the executed  
who have sacrificed their lives  
in 1956–1961 for the freedom  
and independence of Hungary

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# One Day That Shook the Communist World

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## Introduction

One of the most perceptive, if also the most controversial, observers of events before and during the Hungarian revolution of 23 October to 4 November 1956 was Leslie B. Bain, the American journalist of Hungarian extraction. In his 1960 book on Eastern Europe, he wrote: “No event in recent history has been so much lied about, distorted, and besmirched as the Hungarian Revolution.”<sup>1</sup>

These words are a very apposite description of the reports and the long-standing debates about the dramatic events that, due mainly to the Kádár regime’s disinformation propaganda, have been partly obscured and partly presented in a blatantly deceptive light. The numerous books and studies published prior to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet system in 1989–1991 by Hungarian expatriates and Western historians about the course and consequences of the uprising and the national war of independence could rectify the facts and analyze the motives behind the decisions in Hungary and abroad only to some extent, because the most important documents held in the secret archives in Budapest, and above all in Moscow, were inaccessible to them.

The fact that today we can present by and large reliable conclusions about the fifty-year-old drama and its global consequences is due primarily to the efforts of the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, established in Budapest in 1991. Two Hungarian historians, the recently deceased founding director György Litván and János M. Rainer, his successor since 1999, together with their colleagues, have published numerous studies and research papers on the events leading up to the revolution, as well as on its course and its aftermath (admittedly predominantly in Hungarian). It is only thanks to their commentaries and supplements that we can now properly classify and check the veracity of the document collections compiled from the former Soviet archives by Russian historians in 1993 and 1996. The exceptional significance of the three handbooks published in 1996 by the Institute on the Chronology,

the Bibliography and Retribution and Recollection, as well as the two-volume biographies of Imre Nagy (by János M. Rainer) and János Kádár (by Tibor Huszár), cannot be overestimated.<sup>2</sup>

Even fifty years after the event, the Hungarian people's uprising, revolution, and freedom fight still attract surprisingly keen interest in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (as well as in other countries), but by no means only within the ranks of the older generation. Yet in spite of the memory of the world-historical significance of the Hungarian Revolution, the course and background of those events are only sketchily known, probably due primarily to the language barrier.

Although I have only briefly described the revolution of 1956 both in my memoirs and in my book on Hungary's history, the triumph and tragedy of the Hungarian uprising have had, as in the case of so many of my compatriots, a crucially formative influence on my life in a multitude of ways. Even though I left Hungary for good on 13 January 1957, I was able, in the midst of events at the Kilián Barracks, to experience in the flesh how world history was being made and the desire for freedom brutally stifled by a foreign army. Contemporary witnesses could not, of course, perceive the background. Still, up to this day the sense of "having been there," namely the direct personal experience, does play a unique role. I was closely acquainted with some of the key personalities of Imre Nagy's circle, such as Miklós Gimes, executed in 1958, and Miklós Vásárhelyi, sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but also with some of the important political and economic spokespersons of the long-lasting Kádár regime. Thanks to the particularly close relationship prevailing between Hungary and Austria, I was able, during the seventies and eighties—albeit consistently monitored and spied on—to report on Hungary for the *Financial Times* as well as for Austrian, Swiss, and German papers and later on in my capacity as editor in chief and director of Austrian television (ORF). Thus I also had the opportunity by way of many private conversations, encounters, and experiences in Hungary personally to observe the phases of the much-discussed amnesia, the "collective repression," as the psychologist Ferenc Mérei, who was sentenced to ten years in prison in 1959, put it.

This special personal background made me decide to write in depth about those great topics—uprising and revolution, freedom fight and

oppression, reprisal and submission—which have kept me under their spell for some fifty years. It is this framework into which the analysis of such complex personalities as of Imre Nagy and János Kádár fits, as well as the dialectic between heroism and treason symbolized by their contrasting roles. The attitude of public opinion then and now is yet another fascinating chapter in contemporary Hungarian history.

Even though there are still some gaps in our knowledge owing to the closed archives of the State Security Service and the Interior and Defense Ministries in Moscow and to some extent in Budapest, on the basis of the currently available sources, we can shed light on such previously fiercely disputed questions as the responsibility for the “cry for help” to the Soviet Union; the siege and capture of the Radio Building by the insurgents; the background of the first Soviet military intervention; the delay and the turnaround in the attitude of Imre Nagy; the “disappearance” of Kádár and his attitude before and after the second Soviet intervention; the zigzag course taken in the Kremlin; the controversial broadcasts by the U.S. radio station Radio Free Europe in Munich and the American aloofness during and after the revolution; the duplicity and betrayal by the Tito regime of the group around Nagy during the three-week asylum in the Yugoslav Embassy; and, finally, the role played by Kádár in the trial of Nagy and his associates.

Above and beyond documents and personal impressions, I was also able to draw for my research for this work on interviews carried out in Moscow with the former head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov; the long-serving Soviet expert on Hungary and until the end of 2005 Russian ambassador in Budapest, Valeri Musatov; the former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger (with the assistance of the ORF office in Washington); as well as prominent Hungarian personages, such as Árpád Göncz (president, 1990–2000); member of Parliament Imre Mécs; the recently deceased poet Istvan Eörsi; the widow of General Pál Maléter, Judit Gyenes; the former chairperson of the Federation of Political Prisoners, Jenő Fónay; and Ödön Pongrátz, one of the legendary brothers (who is still fostering the tradition of the Corvinists in his museum).

The Hungarian Revolution was the greatest challenge to Soviet hegemony in post-World War II Eastern Europe and at the same time a widely visible symbol of the bankruptcy of Soviet-style socialism. It was

an international event, which to this day has engendered a profoundly positive image of Hungary in the eyes of the world. It was a “victorious defeat,”<sup>3</sup> an authentic “anti-totalitarian”<sup>4</sup> revolution, and perhaps above all a “fantastic story.”<sup>5</sup> It is a paradox, yet true: The ethical significance of this Revolution of Hopelessness has been, and is, better perceived and more appreciated abroad than in Hungary.

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## A Day That Shook the Communist World

I

No one would have thought, on that radiantly beautiful, memorable fall day as Budapest shone in a resplendent light, that 23 October 1956 would go down in history and be documented as a major world event. Historians and journalists have been arguing for decades about that elemental episode, which on that day opened the way in Hungary for a revolutionary process of dramatic and bloody events, often without any apparent logic. In his *Reflections on History*, Jacob Burckhardt writes about historical crises: “Developments which otherwise take centuries seem to flit by like phantoms in months or weeks, and are fulfilled. . . . Only the study of the past can provide us with a standard by which to measure the rapidity and strength of the particular movement in which we live.”<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, the “unexpected revolution”<sup>2</sup> began on that Tuesday with two mighty student-organized protest marches. One of them proceeded from the building of the Faculty of Arts on the Pest side to the Petöfi Monument on the banks of the Danube, the other from the Technical University (TU) in Buda to the monument of the legendary Polish general Joseph Bem, who had led Hungarian forces to victory in several engagements with the Habsburgs and the czarist interventionist army in 1849. That morning the student leaders had already coordinated their deployment plans. The students of the TU, the Sports School, and eight hundred cadets from the Petöfi Political Officers’ Training Academy marched at first in silence, linking arms. Those from the Faculties of Philosophy and Law chanted demands for freedom, marching to the Petöfi Monument carrying signs and banners proclaiming: “Poland is our example, let us follow the Hungarian path!” When the famous actor Imre Sinkovits began reciting Petöfi’s stirring poem *Talpra magyar, hív a haza* (Rise Magyar, the Country Calls!), the refrain rang out from ten thousands throats from the neighboring narrow streets as well: “God of Hungarians, we swear unto Thee, we swear unto Thee that slaves we shall no longer be!”



The spontaneous, grassroots demonstration, originally called as a show of solidarity with the Polish reformers threatened by the Soviets, was something unheard of in the eyes of the Communist Party leadership, accustomed as they were to officially organized mass marches. For the past eight years or more, ever since the Communist takeover, there had been but a single spontaneous demonstration of displeasure by soccer fans embittered over the lost championship in Bern in 1954. And even that had been shamefacedly hushed up by the media. Other than that, mass rallies and marches in the capital had been organized solely by the powers that be. Thus it was a totally novel experience for the students, as it was for everyone else! The frequently screened TV pictures demonstrate how happy, excited, and elated the young people were in their role as successors of the 1848 revolutionary youth.

However, most people found out only through the contradictory radio announcements that something unusual was afoot. At 12:35 p.m. a Gypsy music program was interrupted on the radio, and a demonstration prohibition, decreed by the interior minister, was broadcast. The students themselves, however, paid little attention either to the prohibition or to its withdrawal, which was announced on the radio at 2:23 p.m. That news seemed to them like a first victory.

The spark that ignited the tinderbox of old grievances was the breakthrough of the reformers in Poland. The traditional friendship between the two countries—the joint kings of old, Hungary's more recent support when over 100,000 Polish refugees fleeing from Nazi occupation found asylum there in 1939–1940, their shared post–World War II fate, and the common threat of Soviet hegemony to their simultaneous reform movements—provoked an added dynamism of revolt against Hungary's own discredited regime. The ongoing tension received a further impetus when it became clear that despite all the Soviet threats, Władysław Gomułka, who had been imprisoned for many years, was going to make a triumphant comeback as head of the Polish United Workers' Party—which actually came about on 21 October 1956. The speech made by the victorious Gomułka to the Central Committee of his party was printed in full in all Hungarian papers on the day of the solidarity demonstration.<sup>3</sup>

All politically involved Hungarians were fully aware that their own future was also at stake. The dam had already been broken the night

before during a stormy meeting of over five thousand students of the Budapest Technical University. The then student and today's liberal member of Parliament Imre Mécse, who was sentenced to death in 1958 for his part in the resistance movement, vividly remembers the passionate discussions, whose direction soon slipped out of the hands of the Communist youth functionaries.

We discussed the sixteen points of our program in a passionate, and in the end euphoric, mood. First we wanted to resolve the establishment of an independent student association in line with that of our brothers-in-arms at the University of Szeged, and then to make the appointment of Imre Nagy as the head of a new government the main point of our program. Students of several other universities and from the Petöfi Military Academy were also present. And then, in the midst of the discussion, in stormed József Szilágyi, a previously convicted prewar Communist, who at age 39 attended a correspondence course at the TU. In an impressive speech he described the dramatic situation in Poland, and called on his enthusiastic audience to put political rather than educational matters in the forefront. Then we unanimously resolved to organize a demonstration as a show of solidarity with the Poles on Tuesday, the 23rd.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that several versions of the TU's legendary points, formulated on the model of the 1848 revolutionaries' twelve-point program, were circulating was due to the spontaneous character of this unique event. As the evening wore on, delegations from other universities and workers from a number of large firms also joined the proceedings. As it was, the program went far beyond all previously discussed reforms, and the demand for the withdrawal of Soviet troops moved to the top of the list. The other core points were calling a party congress and the election of a new Communist Party leadership; a new government under the leadership of Imre Nagy and the removal of all criminal Stalinist leaders; free elections, that is, a multiparty system, freedom of the media, and removal of the Stalin Monument; and the reintroduction of Hungarian national holidays and symbols of state.

Something incredible came to pass: Typewritten leaflets, mimeographed by the thousands during the night on the few copying machines

available in the university offices, for the first time spelled out in black and white the call for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and for free elections. At 7:30 p.m. the suggestion was born amid an atmosphere of exuberant enthusiasm to have the demands read out over the radio during the eight-o'clock news. István Jankovics, a senior lecturer, promptly drove with three students to the radio station in his 1938-vintage Topolino. On the way it transpired that the demands had not even been written down yet. While still in the car, Jankovics and the students quickly summarized the TU meeting's demands in ten points. That is how the "Topolino-Points" (as the *Corriere della Sera* later called them) came into being. However, the officials at the radio station were willing to broadcast only five points, and definitely not the demands for the pullout of the Soviet troops and for free elections. The correspondents of the Communist youth association who were present also refused to disseminate the highly explosive document. That is why the indignant students resorted to calling a demonstration for the following day as a show of solidarity with the Poles.<sup>5</sup>

In the early hours of Tuesday mimeographed appeals or small posters with the TU students' demands appeared on walls, trees, and advertising pillars. Some contained 10 or 12, others 14 or 16 points. The fact that several versions were being circulated demonstrates the impulsive and spontaneous nature of both the TU meeting and the preparations made by the representatives of the various faculties for the great rally.

Everyone experienced this memorable, radiantly beautiful fall day in a different way. It happened to be my second day at my new job for the evening paper *Esti Hirlap*, in the same press building that also housed the editorial office of the party's principal organ, *Szabad Nép*. After fifteen months of military service, eight months' imprisonment, and a three-year professional ban, that is, altogether five long (wasted) years, I was at last permitted, since the previous day, to work as a completely rehabilitated journalist. When some of my colleagues decided to have a look around to see what was happening in the city, I too went along with them. For the time being the atmosphere was deceptively calm but somewhat tense. Still, here and there we already noticed young people wearing rosettes of red, white, and green in their buttonholes. Some were already putting up posters on advertising pillars. All of us, who were on the side of Imre Nagy and the reform movement that he represented, were hoping for a democratic restructuring of the Socialist

model. We were deeply impressed by the changes in Poland, and above all by the experiments in Yugoslavia, the only Communist country in Eastern Europe that had seceded from the Soviet sphere of interest. "We," at least everyone that I knew, were reformers and not revolutionaries.

The marches began in the early afternoon. At first the students sang not only the Hungarian national anthem, but also the "Marseillaise," followed by various revolutionary and folk songs. Wherever the huge throng passed by, life came to a standstill. People waved from the windows, and the streets reverberated with slogans. The demonstrators carried Hungarian and in some cases Polish national flags. They marched through the inner city and the boulevard in Pest, across Margaret Bridge to the Buda side (Elizabeth Bridge, destroyed during World War II, had not yet been rebuilt at the time) to the Bem Monument. By then the crowd numbered in the tens of thousands.

In the meantime, however, the character of the demonstration had changed. Many sympathizers, mainly young workers and other passersby, joined the students. The slogans became increasingly radical and patriotic: "Russians go home!" "Go home and take your Stalin [meaning the behemoth statue] with you!" "Rákosi into the Danube, Imre Nagy into power!" "Don't stop halfway, sweep Stalinism away!" "If you're Hungarian, you're with us!" More and more flags appeared from which the red star had been ripped.

Since our paper had already been printed and released with its optimistic headlines about the Polish reformers' peaceful victory and the impending, or rather already launched, student demonstrations, I tried with some of my colleagues to catch up first by car and then on foot with the march, which had reached the Bem Monument by late afternoon.

Nobody was in a position to channel the spontaneous demonstration or to influence the dynamics of its progress. Nowhere was there even a loudspeaker in working order. The unprecedented, immense grassroots outpouring swamped both the representatives of the Petöfi Circle, the discussion forum of intraparty rebels (whose vehicle with its loudspeaker was lost somewhere in the milling crowd), and the official Communist youth functionaries and party activists who had been hastily mobilized. The speech of the president of the Writers' Union was

drowned out by the noise, as was Mihály Vörösmarty's poem *The Call*, recited by a famous actor.

*The Abandoned Masses* is the title of a brilliant essay collection by the contemporary Hungarian historian László Varga. It is a most appropriate portrayal of what happened in Budapest that day, 23 October 1956, a natural political phenomenon without a focus, without a concept, and without any coordinated leadership. That the close to 900,000-strong Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP), the "vanguard of the working class," was but a colossus with feet of clay was proven within the next few hours. It was thus absolutely logical that the demonstrators and the immense human mass that had joined the students in Pest and Buda should surge from Bem Square over Margaret Bridge in the direction of Parliament House on the banks of the Danube. They wanted to hear the "great white hope" of the opposition, the sixty-year-old Imre Nagy, who had been toppled by the Stalinists in early 1955 and readmitted to the party only ten days earlier.

But how did I, for my part, live through the rest of that day? After the imposing rally at the Bem Monument, I went home. I did not know anything about the crowd assembled in front of the Parliament Building, nor of the demonstration that was under way in front of the radio station. First of all I had to attend to a personal matter. My friend Endre Gömöri, at the time special radio correspondent, had phoned me from Warsaw, asking that I look in on his wife and baby daughter. "For safety's sake," he said. Obviously he was better informed through the international news agencies and Polish correspondents in Budapest than I was. At any rate, I took the tram to his place and found both of them safe and sound.

By nightfall, around 6 p.m., some 200,000 people had gathered in front of the Parliament Building and in neighboring streets—students, workers, white-collar workers, pensioners—all of whom were calling for Imre Nagy. The path to an uprising could no longer be blocked by the time-tested methods of Communist "crisis management": intimidation and misinformation. By the early hours of the evening it became obvious that the regime, installed by the Soviet occupation force and controlled from Moscow, had lost its foothold.

For the leaders in party headquarters, right next to the Parliament Building, it was a ghastly situation. Although fearing the worst from the

commotion, they were totally isolated from the masses, even from their own party members. Since the Kremlin-endorsed dismissal—imposed in the presence of Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan on 18 July—of Mátyás Rákosi, Stalin's hated "best disciple," the process of the party's disintegration had continued inexorably. In a conversation on 12 October with Soviet ambassador Yuri Andropov, Rákosi's successor Ernő Gerő, the almost-as-unpopular and inflexible Muscovite, described the situation as "exceptionally grave."<sup>6</sup> The "extremely nervous" and hesitant first secretary added that it was more than likely that it would deteriorate further. The former mayor of Budapest and economic boss Zoltán Vas, also a Muscovite, but henceforth a follower of Imre Nagy, bluntly warned the ambassador of an "impending national catastrophe," which "the Soviet comrades do not see, because they are listening to people who are supported neither by the party nor by the people."<sup>7</sup> Even the highly intelligent Andropov, who was to be elected secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in November 1982 after a long career as head of the KGB, had seen the answer in a "crackdown" on the Hungarian party leadership, "else we regard it as entirely possible that Imre Nagy could become the leader of the party and the country."<sup>8</sup>

However, the authorities, and especially Gerő himself, underestimated the danger. Despite the domestic warning signals, he wanted to savor the Moscow-initiated conditional "reconciliation" with President Tito, who until recently had counted as the revisionist archenemy. The party and government delegation, including almost half of the Politburo—First Secretary Gerő, his deputy János Kádár, Prime Minister András Hegedüs, and the Budapest party secretary István Kovács—happened to be on an eight-day state visit to Yugoslavia. While they exchanged amicable words with their hosts, chatted with them about the different paths to socialism, and even went hunting with them, the regime at home came progressively undone. In a joint interview the blissfully ignorant Kádár and Hegedüs declared to the Belgrade journal *Politika*: "Matters are proceeding in a healthy direction." After signing a completely trivial bilateral communiqué, the delegation arrived by train on the morning of 23 October at the Budapest East Station. All the remaining Politburo members, as well as two Central Committee secretaries, showed up at the station to warn the home-coming leaders of the situation's serious nature. The entire group drove immediately to party

headquarters to start a virtually uninterrupted series of crisis meetings at ten o'clock.

This day was the actual turning point in the process of disintegration of a broken-down "apparatus," whose controllers were hesitant, ineffectual, and above all inflexible. In the light of an increasingly dramatic situation, not only did the headless "apparatus" have nothing with which to neutralize the situation, but it added fuel to the fire by a series of fatal miscalculations.

During the midday hours a steady stream of enraged delegations of writers and student leaders, party organizations, and journalists of the party organ *Szabad Nép* beat a path to the door. Shouting matches between the rebellious party journalists, who had enthusiastically embraced the student movement in their editorial entitled "New Spring Review of Troops" and the "hawks" in the Politburo, who demanded not only the prohibition of the demonstration but if necessary the order to shoot, clearly demonstrated the hitherto inconceivable loosening of the hallowed dogma of party discipline. The then thirty-five-year-old prime minister András Hegedűs, one of Rákosi's and Gerő's minions who had replaced the popular Imre Nagy in the spring of 1955, described in his memoirs thirty years later that at the time the Politburo was no longer the country's collective leadership, but a heap of bewildered people who were capable of making diametrically opposed decisions every half hour. Thus the demonstration was at first prohibited by the Politburo, to be followed by the lifting of the prohibition, only to be banned once more and yet again authorized, depending on whether the hard-liners or the followers of the more flexible line happened to have gained the upper hand.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the ban on public meetings and demonstrations was lifted in the end was the result of the high-ranking army, police, and security officers' unanimous opinion that they had no "suitable means" available for dispersing the demonstrators. Colonel Sándor Kopácsi, the police chief of the capital, who sympathized with the intraparty opposition, had assured the students in the morning that the police would not proceed forcefully against the demonstration. During these hours news of the "apparatus's" and especially the highest leadership's weakness and panic spread like wildfire.

In this chaotic situation the party bigwigs chose the worst imaginable solution: Party Chief Gerő was to broadcast a speech that same evening at 8. While tens of thousands were gathered in front of the Parliament Building, and other groups of demonstrators proceeded to the radio station and the Stalin Monument at the edge of City Park, the first secretary retired to his office to work on his radio speech. What, for instance, did the official number two, Prime Minister Hegedüs, do at that point? According to his statement in an interview released much later, he was in his office working on files accumulated during his ten days' absence. He had not listened to the radio and was not aware of what was happening in town. However, some years later Hegedüs, who in the meantime had developed into an antiestablishment thinker, contritely admitted that he had completely forgotten that he was chairing a meeting of the Council of Ministers on 23 October! The minutes published after the change of regime in 1989 show that the prime minister reassured his colleagues regarding Gerő's forthcoming speech and acquainted them with the Politburo's decision to convene a meeting of the Central Committee for the following Wednesday, the thirty first. It would then present a clear program for the further building of the Socialist democracy as well as the uninterrupted perpetuation of the bonds of friendship with the Soviet Union. However, contrary to Hegedüs, several important ministers were worried about the critical situation and demanded an earlier date for the Central Committee meeting. This was an absolutely classic example of Freudian repression, of "amnesia as a survival remedy!"<sup>10</sup>

While the completed text of Gerő's speech was being presented for approval to another session of the Politburo meeting, things were happening at breakneck speed in the city. In the square in front of the Parliament Building the streetlights were turned off in the hope that the darkness would dampen the spirits of the people and that the immense crowd, impatiently waiting for Imre Nagy, would disperse. It was worse than a provocation—it was a crass tactical error. The infuriated people did not disperse; instead they ignited their newspapers. In the end the parliamentary guards gave in and turned the lights back on in the square. From 5 p.m. onward more and more demonstrators appeared in front of the radio station, and their demands to have the students' sixteen points put on the air during the newscast became increasingly vociferous. Having consulted party headquarters, the officials at the radio station



refused to the last to broadcast the demands for the pullout of the Soviet troops and for free elections for a multiparty system. Later, thousands of extremely incensed people tried to force their way inside the building. Almost at the same time thousands of impatient demonstrators, beside themselves with anger for having waited for hours in vain before the Parliament for Imre Nagy, assembled at the edge of City Park to topple the eight-meter-tall and eighty hundredweight Stalin Monument off its pedestal. Quite a few trucks flying Hungarian national flags were by now speeding around in the city filled with young factory workers, some toward the radio station or the Stalin Monument, others, however, already on the lookout for armaments factories and ordnance depots.

The slogan "Now or never!" echoed everywhere. In this feverishly tense atmosphere Gerő's fifteen-minute speech, which had been announced over and over again, acted like a detonator that set off the accumulated explosives.<sup>11</sup> The address elicited general outrage. Basically it was a rambling and boring defense of the alleged achievements of the people's democracy and the eternal friendship with the Soviet Union based on a completely equal footing. This, however, was followed by offensive and provocative threats against those "who try to spread the poison of chauvinism among our youth, and who use the democratic freedom which our state has assured the working people for nationalistic demonstrations. However, not even this demonstration shakes the resolution of our party to proceed on the road to developing Socialist democracy." Admittedly there is no trace in the text of the assertion that was circulating then and has still some credence to this day that Gerő had called the young demonstrators a "rabble" or even a "Fascist rabble." In the dramatic situation, his arrogant speech with his hackneyed phrases and threats had a catastrophic effect, especially on the demonstrators who were besieging the radio station. It unscrupulously poured oil on the flames. The speech had been prerecorded at party headquarters, and many of the demonstrators, who had wanted to confront the hated party chief with their manifesto in front of the radio station, were utterly affronted. Although events in the capital were of considerable significance, one must not forget that the students had organized meetings in the more important regional towns as well. It is little known that the first casualties in the early evening hours were in Debrecen in eastern Hungary. There a total of thirty thousands students and workers

had demonstrated during the day. When they threw stones at the building of the Interior Ministry's regional administration, three of the demonstrators were shot by the security forces.

The explosion of pent-up hatred evident that evening and in the ensuing days was directed last but not least against the intolerable and cynical insult against the people and the nation. The Leninist party dictatorship never consisted merely of the use of force. Alexander Solzhenitsyn expressed this aptly in his acceptance speech when presented with the Nobel Prize: "Force can only shroud itself by lies, and lies can only be upheld by force." In their unbridled rage the people first attacked the symbols of dictatorship and of foreign rule. That is why the furious demonstrators' prime target was the colossus on Parade Square, where the powers that be, agents of a foreign power, used to wave from the marble platform to the hundreds of thousands marching under duress on 4 April (the official day of liberation) and 7 November (the day of the Russian Revolution). At precisely 9:37 p.m., skilled laborers managed to topple the hated Stalin Monument off its base with the help of trucks and blowtorches. The waiting people then fell upon this symbol of the system with great gusto to smash it into smithereens with hammers and hatchets. Gaudy red stars were removed from more and more government and party buildings. During the late evening hours of that first day, the crowds also burned pictures of and books by and about Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.<sup>12</sup>

Even before Geró's infamous radio address, even before shots were fired on the demonstrators in front of the Radio Building, and even before the appearance of the first Soviet tanks, it was a popular uprising by young students and workers that was under way. The Kádár regime's numerous propaganda efforts between 1957 and 1988 were far from the truth precisely as far as the basic questions were concerned. Instead of an alleged insurrection instigated and organized by "Western intelligence agencies"—with the occupation of the essential centers of power and communication, the telephone and telegraph exchanges, police stations, ministries, and party buildings—what the world witnessed was an elemental outbreak of the Hungarian people's rage against dictatorship and foreign rule.

We know today from original sources that, due to the pressure of the rebellious streets and the subsequent armed resistance, the situation in the

centers of power in Moscow and Budapest changed not merely from day to day but often from hour to hour. Members of the CPSU's Politburo, in particular the main protagonist, Nikita Khrushchev, wavered in their opinions, which changed even within the very same session (just as their henchmen's did in Budapest) as they strove not to jeopardize their own positions. In this political milieu events took an uncontrollable course, especially in the capital, but later, of course, in the entire country.

The so-called Leninists experienced thus a revolutionary situation that, according to their taskmaster, displayed three criteria: first, the inability of the upper strata to maintain their authority, which also involved a rift within the ruling class itself; second, a revolutionary situation characterized by the escalation of the social disparities between the ruling class and the downtrodden masses of the populace beyond the usual extent; third, a significant increase in the populace's political activities, a rapid increase in the fighting spirit of the revolutionary classes, and the inclination toward revolutionary actions.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is not sufficient for the outbreak of a revolution that the "lower strata" no longer have the will to carry on in the old manner; it is also essential that the "upper strata" should no longer have the ability to do so.

The only Hungarian politician who might have had a ghost of a chance to avert the outbreak of the armed uprising with the right words at the right time was Imre Nagy. Where was he? What did he and his like-minded friends and advisers do on that memorable day?

Ever since June 1953, most Hungarians considered Imre Nagy the symbol of new departures. He was installed as prime minister on the orders of the Soviet leadership in the face of the powerful party boss Mátyás Rákosi's temporizing opposition, who as Stalin's man of confidence had until then possessed total power as party and government head. Yet this staid man, who gave the impression of a jovial professor and—in contrast to Rákosi—spoke to the people in a lucid, pleasant-sounding Hungarian, managed to implement a new moderate course, at least for seventeen months until November 1954. In the last four and a half months of his incumbency, he was already powerless due to the change of policy in Moscow and the intrigues of the Rákosi-dominated party apparatus. Although a lifelong Communist who had spent twenty years in Soviet exile, after his downgrading he was not willing to perform the ritual of self-criticism. He lost his professorship and his party

membership, but remained not only popular but also a latent danger to the Stalinist clique around Rákosi. After the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, the de-Stalinization initiated by Khrushchev, and Rákosi's downfall, the cautious and mistrustful Nagy, albeit merely a "private citizen" without any function, once again became a key figure of the true events. All that happened between 23 October and 4 November 1956, nay, during the last twenty months of his life, can be viewed only in conjunction with his personality, his career, and the subsequent inner transformation of the reform Communist and patriot.

János M. Rainer, the author of the first comprehensive biography of Imre Nagy,<sup>14</sup> estimates that in the summer of 1956 the circle of Nagy's partisans and active sympathizers respectively comprised two hundred to three hundred people. Many of them had read his secretly circulated writings on political theory, which were in part aimed at the party leadership. These intellectuals, predominantly writers and journalists, prewar Communists, and reformist party functionaries, as well as youth representatives, formed not an organization but "a loose informal political pressure group." The reformers, most of all Nagy, who adhered strictly to party discipline, wanted a correction, not the abolition of the political system. No one from his closer circle or the thousands of committed supporters of reform knew or suspected that in the Hungary of October 1956 a correction was already tantamount to the abolition of the system.<sup>15</sup>

According to the opinions of his closest companions, Nagy himself was the most wary and skeptical of all of them. Above all, he was a procrastinator and not a determined politician. Suffering from a heart condition and prone to occasional bouts of depression, he frequently underwent inexplicable periods of passivity in crucial situations. That was also the case during the days after his readmission to the party. On 22 October, for instance, he went to Badacsony on Lake Balaton to attend a grape harvest, although his closest adviser, the journalist Miklós Vársárhelyi, advised him against it in view of the tense situation. However, the exciting news of events in the Polish party caused him to drive back to Budapest sooner than he had planned. That same evening two of his influential friends, both of them Central Committee members, called on him, followed by several phone messages urging him to talk to the students at the Technical University. Shortly before midnight, during

a lightning visit to his apartment, a professor known to him from the Moscow emigration and two assistants from the TU implored him to appeal to the students for moderation, particularly as their demand for the pullout of Soviet troops was by now at the top of their list. Nagy refused all requests, with—among others—the rationalization that not knowing the party's up-to-date standpoint, he would not be able to answer the students' questions. He was not in favor of the demonstration.

On the morning of 23 October, Nagy at first looked after his sick grandchildren while his son-in-law and closest friend, Ferenc Jánosi, went to get some medicine for them. Jánosi, was a former Protestant pastor who, after an anti-Fascist indoctrination as a POW in the Soviet Union, made a political career as a high-ranking officer, deputy minister for culture and general secretary of the Popular Front. After his father-in-law's downfall, he too was shunted to an insignificant post, and his wife was fired from her job as a translator at the Russian-language monthly *Vengriya*. During the ensuing turbulent days, Jánosi was constantly at the side of Nagy. Thus, too, late that morning Nagy and his closest circle of friends met to confer in the apartment of the publicist Géza Losonczy. Losonczy, at the time editor of *Magyar Nemzet*, the Popular Front's daily, was a prewar Communist and for a time political state secretary at the Ministry of Popular Education. He was arrested on trumped-up charges in 1951 and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, but was released in view of serious illness in the summer of 1954. Oppositionist writers and students considered him Imre Nagy's respected spokesperson. The following also attended the conference: the journalist Sándor Haraszti, Losonczy's father-in-law, a prewar Communist who had been sentenced to death by the Stalinists and subsequently released after four years on death row; his former codefendant Szilárd Ujhelyi, who had shared his fate; as well as two prominent reform Communists journalists: Miklós Vásárhelyi, chief press officer of Nagy during his prime ministership, and Miklós Gimes, the most radical mastermind of their intimate circle.

In view of the dramatic turnabout in Poland and the return of Gomulka to the head of the party, they all shared the opinion that Imre Nagy too could soon become prime minister again. That is why they discussed contingency plans for the essential comprehensive changes in the composition of the Politburo and the Central Committee. The most

important conclusion they reached was that, whatever the outcome, Nagy should accept an invitation to return to the top only after all his personnel and political conditions were met, first and foremost Gerő's resignation as first secretary. They had no political or economic program. That summer Nagy had told a visitor: "In the fall power will drop into my lap." His critical biographer aptly remarked: "If he really believed that, then it is almost incomprehensible why he did not consider how he would use that power."<sup>16</sup> As a close friend later noted, regrettable though it was, they never actually discussed fundamental issues.

However, the opinions about the student demonstrations were varied. Nagy rejected the demonstration, as well as his friends' suggestion that he appear at the mass rally now held with official approval at the Petőfi Monument. On leaving he told them that the demonstration could have serious consequences. He then proceeded to go home with his son-in-law. While the latter went to town, Nagy ate his midday meal, after which he took a nap. Considering the turmoil taking place in the city, his biographer was hard put to explain this flabbergasting fact. He tried to do so by mustering a number of reasons, such as habit, the "restful life-style" prescribed by his cardiologist, the previous day's agitating discussions lasting well into the night, and possibly even a certain subconscious desire to escape from responsibility.

Later in the afternoon eyewitnesses of the demonstration turned up at the house. Writers such as old friends Tibor Déry, Péter Veres, and others gave their accounts over the telephone about the huge crowds waiting in front of the Parliament. Not only his followers but also a smaller group of students pressed him to proceed to the Parliament. The president of the radio station, Valeria Benke, phoned twice between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. asking for his advice on whether to permit the students' sixteen points to be put on air. Nagy said that she should ask the Politburo, and later added that if it would placate the angry crowd in front of the Radio Building, then the manifesto should be broadcast. Meanwhile three desperate deputy prime ministers, two of them Politburo members, called Nagy from the Parliament; thus far he had been totally opposed to making a public appearance. When he was told at 8 p.m. that they were transmitting the Politburo's request that he should come immediately to the Parliament Building to speak to the waiting crowd, Nagy finally gave in and composed a short address. Before leaving, he

read out the text to the few friends and followers who were present in the apartment. All of them regarded the draft poor, insubstantial, and inappropriate. Yet Nagy did not alter anything in the text. The leader of the Council of Ministers' secretariat picked him up in the prime minister's large, black, armor-plated limousine. His son-in-law, János, and a journalist friend, György Fazekas, accompanied him in the car.<sup>17</sup>

It was already 9 p.m. when Nagy appeared in a window of the Parliament to address the vast and impatient crowd, estimated at anywhere between 150,000 and 200,000. The overcautious, ponderous old Communist, ever toeing the party line, who was unable to improvise, who precisely during these days feared a huge provocation from the besieged Gerő, was suddenly confronted with "an unknown force," namely the people themselves.<sup>18</sup> It was, like so many things during those days, an incredible scene. Fazekas was worried that the corpulent Nagy would fall from the window, and so he was held fast by Fazekas and Deputy Prime Minister Erdei. After some hecklers shouted "We want to see Imre Nagy," Erdei lit his face with a flashlight. That moment Nagy realized that the speech he had prepared was inappropriate and that he had to improvise. When he began his speech with the normal address "Comrades!" it was answered by whistles and chantings of "We are not comrades!" and his appeasing, pedestrian comments, by overt disappointment. He omitted entire passages from his brief prepared speech, yet what he said still contained only cut-and-dried repetitive promises of democratization by way of the Central Committee's forthcoming decisions, time and time again interspersed with calls for sobriety and discipline. His only successful gesture was that in conclusion he asked his audience to join him in singing the national anthem.<sup>19</sup>

By this time news had already been received about a gun battle at the radio station; the ambulance service reported the first fatal casualties at 9:37 p.m., and at the same time the Stalin Monument was torn off its pedestal. A quarter of an hour later, enraged demonstrators attacked the building of the central party organ, *Szabad Nép* (Free People). They brought along the corpse of a demonstrator, wrapped in a national flag, who had probably just been killed near the Radio Building. A bookshop was set on fire. What happened next was not a planned attack; demonstrators did not even attempt to occupy the composing room. As the