

THE WEAKENING OF COMMUNIST POWER: THE ANTECEDENTS OF THE REVOLUTION

The death of Iosif Stalin in 1953 opened a new epoch for the oppressed countries of the Soviet empire. The signs of change were most obvious in the case of Hungary

By 1953 the real income of the overwhelming majority of Hungarian workers had dropped by some 20 percent in relation to 1949. The mandatory political meetings had increasingly undermined the morale of the workers, as the morale of the peasantry, subjected to repeated requisitions, was further undermined by forced collectivization.

Nikita S. Khrushchev and the Soviet Party leadership realized that the policies of forced industrialization, collectivization and general sovietization have generated deep discontent in the relatively modernized region of East Central Europe, leading to a potential explosion in the case of Hungary. In June 1953, only two months after the death of Stalin, Khrushchev and company secretly summoned first secretary of the Party and prime minister, Mátyás Rákosi, along with other Hungarian leaders, to Moscow. They were expected to practice self-criticism for the relentless Stalinist policies they pursued until that time (albeit those policies had been prescribed by the Kremlin) and were instructed to elaborate a program catering better to the needs of the population. Rákosi was ordered to cede the chair of prime minister to Imre Nagy, who had been relegated into the background, but who had criticized the Party leaders for the same reasons.

All this was typical of the conditions in those days: within the Soviet sphere, only the Kremlin could authorize even favorable changes.

After the dressing-down in Moscow the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP) held a meeting. At this point the most prominent leaders, the foursome of Mátyás Rákosi, Ernő Gerő, Mihály Farkas, and József Révai, were in the crossfire of attacks, because of their economic policies as well as their disregard of the laws and due process.

Thus the process of destalinization began in July 1953, with the prime ministry of Imre Nagy. Forced collectivization came to a halt, the notorious "kulak lists" were eliminated, acts of lawlessness gradually ceased: no more forced labor camps, and the show trials were under review. All this made Imre Nagy extremely popular, even though Rákosi and company were increasingly hampering the reforms.

For about a year and a half there was mudslinging between Rákosi and Imre Nagy, and their respective followers. The stakes were rather high. Rákosi's arbitrary rule and his role in setting up the show trials tied him to the Stalinist regime. He knew that the reforms would lead to his political demise. Nagy, on the other hand, believed it was possible to build socialism without resorting to terror. Of the Communist leaders at that time he was the only one who tolerated dissent, and indeed made it possible for non-Communists to play a role in politics. (Those outside the Party, however, could accomplish nothing in public affairs, because the decisions had to be sanctioned by the Party and its apparatus, even at the local level.)

Rákosi, relying on the Party apparatus, did everything in his power to isolate Nagy. The prime minister could count on the goodwill of the common people and the support of the intelligentsia. The new government program amounted to a real liberation; it was an admission that the self-extolling propaganda of the Party did not correspond to reality, and this was officially recognized. Even though the professional elite among the Communists did not dare or was unable to break with the dogmatic ideological approach, the majority of the staff of Party daily *Szabad Nép* attacked Rákosi and company openly. The most outspoken, however, were quickly removed by the Party officials.

During the premiership of Nagy in 1953–54 the standard of living rose, there was progress in agriculture and the production of consumer goods. Steps were taken to restore due process. Beginning with 1954, victims of the show trials of the previous years who were still alive, including János Kádár, the future leader, were released from confine-

ment. The issue of these fake trials and the rehabilitation of the victims was still a taboo topic, mainly because Rákosi was directly involved.

Upon his return from Moscow at the end of November Rákosi already knew that the hardliners were once again in the saddle: they disapproved of the admission of West Germany into NATO, as they did of the thaw initiated by Imre Nagy. They had decided to “restore order” in Hungary. Rákosi briefed the Political Committee, which once again, opted to back him against Nagy. In January 1955, once again, the situation was resolved in Moscow, in the presence of the two antagonists. This time the Soviet Party leaders directed their severe criticism at Nagy’s “rightist deviation,” although he refused to indulge in self-criticism and stood by his convictions, then and later.

From then on Rákosi’s efforts were directed at excluding Nagy from political life, not without success. He identified the main danger as residing in “rightist, anti-Marxist, anti-Party, and opportunist” views. The Party apparatus increasingly rallied to Rákosi’s side. In April 1955 Nagy was relieved of all his offices and eventually expelled from the Party.

The Party officials wanted to restore the powers Rákosi had before June 1953, but they had to realize that the era of “classical Stalinism” had passed. Since the thaw the tools of terror could no longer be used indiscriminately, the Stalinist ideology was no longer unequivocal. Nor did they succeed in removing Nagy completely from public life, since he retained many disciples, and found increasing numbers of followers among the youth (e.g., the Petőfi Circle). The opposition group formed in this manner, although it had no formal existence, launched the first significant anti-Stalinist reform movement in East Central Europe and, for over one year, from the summer of 1955 to the fall of 1956, played an increasingly significant role in Hungarian politics, resulting unintentionally in the Revolution of 1956.

The effectiveness of this opposition movement was promoted by the international conjuncture, the atmosphere of moderation, the Soviet-Yugoslav rapprochement and, finally, the Twentieth Congress of the CPUSSR in March of 1956, where Khrushchev spoke at length about Stalin’s terrible crimes, and demanded that the Stalinist ideology be discredited.

This marked the end of Rákosi’s political career for it became obvious that his person was the main obstacle to reform. During the spring

and summer of 1956 there were more and more demands for the resignation of the hated tyrant. At the meetings of the opposition the problems of the country were openly discussed, with two exceptions: dependence on the Soviet Union and one-party rule remained taboo subjects even then, implicitly, by consensus rather than by explicit statements.

The bloody events in Poznan, in Poland, at the end of June (the beating of the workers during their protest, resulting in fifty dead and about three hundred wounded) spurred the Hungarian leaders to take a firmer stand. But then the Soviet leaders, upon the intervention of President Tito of Yugoslavia, forced Rákosi to resign, put him on an airplane and flew him to Moscow. He was replaced by the second in command, the old confidant of Moscow, Ernő Gerő, whereas János Kádár became the new second in command, as the secretary of the Central Committee.

The Soviet and Hungarian administrations did not undertake more meaningful changes. The Hungarian Party leaders had lost all credibility in front of public opinion, while the people began to lose their sense of fear. Ernő Gerő was hardly more popular than Rákosi had been, but he was less intimidating. His feelings of unsteadiness became evident after only a few weeks.

In September the rehabilitation of the victims of the Communist regime became unavoidable. Gerő and Kádár were hoping to carry out the process quietly, out of the limelight, but Júlia Rajk demanded an open, ceremonial reburial, along with a complete moral rehabilitation of her husband, László Rajk, executed in 1949. She had the backing of the entire opposition within the Party and other social forces. Gerő and company dared not deny her wish.

The reburial of the remains of Rajk revealed the criminality of the Communist regime to millions. At the same time, the masses sensed the feelings of insecurity, the paralysis of the establishment. We may consider that day as the opening salvo of the revolution. But the revolution was not dominated by the same forces as the movement for reform.¹

THE OUTBREAK OF THE REVOLUTION

In the fall of 1956 a structurally fatally flawed Communist regime confronted a growing opposition within the Party—an

opposition which was aware of the backing of the masses. This opposition expected the realization of reforms by a change of leadership within the establishment.

In October 1956, when Władisław Gomułka became the Party leader in Poland, despite opposition from the Soviet Central Committee, the Hungarian opposition saw its tendencies vindicated. The ordinary citizen felt the time for action had come, for if one took a determined stand it seemed even the Kremlin could be forced to compromise.

The movements of university students also gathered momentum throughout the country, contributing to the weakening of the Party establishment. They created independent organizations, distancing themselves from the centralized Stalinist network of institutions; they formulated their demands in points of programs, presenting these to industrial plants, to local and national political bodies. They signaled they were prepared to act, if necessary, by means of student strikes and demonstrations.

The programs included reforms, such as the appointment of Nagy as premier, the summoning of a Party congress, the reassessment of the practice of requisitions and of piecework. By then, however, democratic and national objectives were added as well, to include a multiparty system, free elections, civil rights, economic independence, etc. There were even demands for the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The delegation dispatched to the state radio, however, was denied permission to read the demands regarding the withdrawal of troops and free elections. Hence the idea of a demonstration for the next day, October 23, arose. Its main content was to express sympathy for the transformation in Poland and to stress various points of the program.

The Party leadership, however, was determined to stop the demonstration, by force if necessary. Others within the establishment, such as Sándor Kopácsi, the chief of police of Budapest, sympathized with the opposition, and objected to police intervention. The Party leadership grew hesitant; first it gave instructions to the forces of law and order to prepare for action but, since the demonstrators were going ahead regardless, and there were protests from the Writers' Union, the Petőfi Circle, the editors of the *Szabad Nép* and the student delegations, it backed down, the ban was lifted.

The number of participants grew by leaps and bounds, and the mood became radicalized. Therefore the Party leaders asked the reluc-

tant Imre Nagy to speak to the crowd assembled in front of the Parliament building. Nagy met the crowd around nine in the evening. His speech, however, caused major disappointment; there was not a word about meeting any of the demands. Neither the Political Committee nor Nagy realized that the demonstration had reached a more advanced stage.

Then the demonstrators toppled the statue of Stalin. Since the program still could not be read over the radio, and Party Secretary Gerő rudely criticized the mass movement, labeling it a “nationalist demonstration,” the people present became determined to present their demands over the air. The secret police, however, fired into the crowd, whereupon the demonstrators placed the radio station under siege, with the help of weapons obtained from military detachments sent to put them down, from the reserves in the factories, from police patrols, and from the barracks. This was the beginning of the armed uprising.

The Soviet troops stationed in the country, responding to Gerő’s plea for help, were mobilized and headed toward the capital. The insurgents, however, took up the fight against them, and thus the unsystematic struggle became a struggle for liberation.²

THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES IN HUNGARY

The stationing of Soviet troops in Hungary was made possible by an arrangement among the Allied forces.³ This agreement was confirmed in 1947 by the terms of the peace treaty between the Soviet Union and Hungary, which stated that the Soviet forces will remain in Hungary as long as their forces are stationed in Austria. Even though the Soviets evacuated Austria, the Warsaw Pact treaty of 1955 sanctioned the Soviet military presence. From then on the equivalent of about four divisions were stationed in Hungary.⁴

On October 23 Ambassador Yuri Andropov⁵ felt that the situation in Budapest “was extraordinarily dangerous,” and requested the intervention of the army over the phone.⁶ The preparations for this intervention were discussed by Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party,⁷ with Gerő, the first

secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party.⁸ Minister of Defense Georgy Zhukov⁹ was given orders to occupy Budapest. (The situation in the other cities and in the villages did not appear as serious.)¹⁰

On the next day, between 2 and 4 A.M., Soviet units, amounting to almost a division in strength, were pouring into the capital from all directions: 6,000 troops, 290 armored vehicles, about 120 army trucks and 156 pieces of artillery.¹¹ The repression of the "counter-revolutionary uprising" was entrusted primarily to the Special Army Corps under Lieutenant General Piotr Lashchenko, stationed at Székesfehérvár.¹²

It was already obvious that this strategy of the political leadership based on a show of force would not achieve its objective.¹³ The Soviet and Hungarian political and military leadership did not expect to encounter serious resistance in Budapest. It soon became clear, however, that the discontented masses will not content themselves with knocking over Soviet monuments. The armored vehicles, in particular, were vulnerable in street fighting at close quarters. This force proved insufficient, even though it was able to guard most of the public buildings. On the 25th three further divisions arrived in Budapest from the Soviet Union and Romania, with effectives totaling twenty thousand.¹⁴ After intense fighting and serious losses the Soviet Party leadership decided to withdraw its troops from Budapest. The decision was largely the outcome of the changed assessment by the Hungarian political leaders. As a condition for the withdrawal it was decided, in agreement with the Hungarian side, that the Soviet troops will be replaced by Hungarian forces, and the rebels will surrender their weapons to those forces. On October 30, the formations directly engaged were withdrawn; the entire operation was concluded by noon of the following day. (The area around the Parliament building was the last one to be vacated by the Soviet forces.)¹⁵ According to several sources, a number of tanks concealed themselves in the Népliget [People's Grove] and elsewhere; in other words, the withdrawal was not complete.

On this same day—partly due to pressure from the Chinese leaders—Nikita Khrushchev and company decided in favor of renewed aggression. By then fresh Soviet units were filtering across the border, in spite of the objections of Prime Minister Imre Nagy.¹⁶ On November 1, in response to the invasion, Nagy officially withdrew Hungary

from the Warsaw Pact and declared the country to be neutral. On November 2 and 3, at the news of Soviet maneuvers, Hungarian military units took up firing positions in the suburbs and outlying districts—at the Juta Hill, at Nagykőrösi and Határ Roads, around Soroksár, at Jászberényi and Kőbányai roads, on Máté Zalka Square, at the Élessarok, and in the Chaikovsky Park.¹⁷ The two politicians hand-picked by Moscow, János Kádár¹⁸ and Ferenc Münnich,¹⁹ were heading to the Kremlin the next day, while the Soviet forces were tightening their ring around Budapest.

At dawn on November 4, on the basis of orders issued by the commander in chief of the Warsaw Pact forces, Konev,²⁰ the Soviets launched operation Whirlwind, with the participation of KGB forces led by Ivan Serov²¹ personally. Armed resistance was attempted once again, mainly by civilians.²² Western or United Nations assistance remained an illusion; the Soviet forces, enjoying enormous supremacy in arms, completed the siege of Budapest, entailing considerable destruction, by November 11.²³ The forces were to leave finally, thirty-five years later, without a fight.

THE FORMATION OF INSURGENT GROUPS

From the moment the revolution broke out more and more groups of insurgents formed across the entire territory of the capital city. Their personnel may be estimated at 15,000 altogether. Their membership was drawn mainly from among young workers and unskilled workers, who had been harassed, and became embittered, humiliated during the Stalinist regime. Many among the older participants had been held in Soviet prisoner of war camps. The majority sympathized with the demands of the revolutionaries. They took up arms to end the dictatorship and secure the country's independence, after eight years of terror. The overwhelming majority opted for a rather vaguely defined "true socialism" and rejected any notion of the restoration of the preceding regime. Others joined the revolutionaries out of a desire for adventure, to acquire weapons²⁴ or to seek opportunities for future success. The outstanding feature of their activities, especially in the first

few days, was their spontaneity, for the fighters were far from belonging to the best informed or the most conscious social strata.

Beginning with the night of October 23 insurgents gathered, usually in small groups, mainly in working class districts, having procured handguns, weapons from the police, from the military, or collected bottles filled with fuel. They found natural-born leaders to fight against Soviet forces assembling nearby.²⁵ The strongest groups of resistance formed in the eighth and ninth districts, on Baross Square, Széna Square, at Pesterzsébet, and Csepel. The majority of the population backed the groups, whose personnel changed almost by the hour. At the beginning their main activity was struggle against the Soviets—and, to a much lesser extent, against the state security forces, the ÁVH, other forces of law enforcement and the military; the lack of a sense of proportions in this endeavor was quite obvious to any outsider. In the first stage of the revolution, even ordinary soldiers were reluctant to take on the risk of fighting on the side of the insurgents; thus the revolutionaries remained the underdog as regards their numbers, their weaponry,²⁶ and their training, throughout. They compensated for these deficiencies by their enthusiasm, their ingenuity.²⁷ The “holy street kids”²⁸ managed to lead the revolution to victory, to the amazement of the world, against an enormous superiority of force—even if only temporarily.²⁹

INSURGENTS DURING THE CEASEFIRE

The circumstances of the insurgents changed considerably after October 28, when the central leadership accepted the resolution of the Party’s Political Committee assessing the events as a revolution, as a freedom fight. The number of groups and their effectives increased considerably at this time; military officers would join as advisors and trainers; the insurgents were also joined by rank and file soldiers, then by politicians, and common criminals released from jail. (Some insurgent groups liberated jails under the assumption that political prisoners were housed there). A National Guard was established with the participation of military, police, and civilian personnel, as the outcome of negotiations and centralization. The commander in chief was General Béla Király,³⁰ his deputy the Colonel of the

Police Sándor Kopácsi, chief of police of Budapest.³¹ On November 2 and 3 the guard representatives elected an executive committee of ten members, the majority civilians. Thus the groups of insurgents, now functioning as units of the National Guard, acquired a legal framework. To prevent chaos they agreed that all those who applied for the guard— if older than eighteen— will be issued an armband and an identification card signed by Kopácsi, whereas all others will be disarmed. (Of course, these measures were not carried out completely.)

The members of the National Guard were promised a regular salary and uniforms. The leaders organized their group in conformity with military hierarchy—into companies and squads—and set up patrols, enforced discipline, tried to prevent—sometimes unsuccessfully—dereliction of duty. In this period the main task of the armed groups was to maintain order, security, and assist in the distribution of provisions to the general population. Moreover, they tracked down the henchmen of the Rákosi dictatorship—mainly members of the ÁVH and Party leaders—so that independent courts of law might eventually judge them.

Almost everywhere “special groups” (they operated under a various names) were formed to capture the guilty, with the help of the general population. (Sometimes the denunciations were mistaken, or deliberately malevolent). The National Guard conducted house-searches in the case of suspects, as prescribed, to collect weapons and uniforms. (There is little doubt that among those conducting searches there were some who “found” other objects of value as well). The units of the National Guard established loose ties with the revolutionary committees in the inner city, while in the suburbs a closer relationship existed.

A special group was formed, from October 30 on, in the building of the *Szabad Nép*. The building had become the base of the technician József Dudás,³² who was in the Communist underground during the Horthy era. The “Hungarian National Revolutionary Committee” he had established was headquartered there with the approval of the workers’ council at the site. The “National Committee” comprised not only fighters, but had the backing of some intellectuals and had access to printing equipment. Dudás, however, was constantly seeking separate ways and became isolated from other armed units. Eventually almost every group refused to cooperate with him.

The only significant combat during the days of the ceasefire also took place on October 30: the siege of Party headquarters on Köztársaság Square, in Budapest. The besiegers came mainly from the seventh and eighth districts. It was commonly believed that the building was still the headquarters of the already dissolved ÁVH and of the antirevolutionary Party apparatus. Armored units of the Hungarian military, dispatched to protect the building, backed the besiegers by mistake.³³ The crowd took over the building with their help and, in a blind rage, lynched about twenty of those they captured, mostly small fry members of the ÁVH.

ARMED RESISTANCE AFTER NOVEMBER 4

As a consequence of the attack by the Soviet forces the number of insurgent groups and the effectives of each diminished, even though there were a few freshly organized units. Several units of the National Guard dissolved upon hearing the news of the aggression. The military personnel were often the first to leave, even before any armed confrontation, either because they realized the hopelessness of the struggle, or because they felt exasperated by the lack of discipline and the chaotic conditions, or because more radical civilian leaders acquired greater influence, at their expense. This was the tendency not only in the central districts, where officers functioned as advisors or were fully integrated, but also in the outlying boroughs, in Csepel, Pesterzsébet, and Újpest, although troops partook in the armed conflict in large numbers, as separate units. From the start the majority of higher ranking officers, thus the deputy commander of the National Guard, Colonel Sándor Kopácsi, felt armed resistance had no prospects of success. General Béla Király, the commander of the National Guard, withdrew with his men to the hills of Buda. The insurgents gradually lost the support of the population, a sense of despair and distrust took over: the feverish hunt for traitors sometimes resulted in tragedies. The insurgents who held out were counting on the intervention of the United Nations or forces from the West. Resistance lasted longest in Pesterzsébet (November 10–11), but fighting continued at the Schmidt Palace in Óbuda, in the area of Saint Ladislas Square in Újpest, at the Élessarok

in Kőbánya, in Erzsébetváros, at the centers of Józsefváros and Ferencváros. Much smaller units of freedom fighters held out in the days November 7 to 10, almost to the bitter end. Several of the captured insurgents, or those suspected of insurgency, were shot on the spot,³⁴ others were deported to the Ukrainian towns of Uzhgorod or Stry in the USSR.

Many of the dissolved units continued to resist, even without weapons, against the resuscitated old regime, both within and outside the country.

THE PRINCIPAL FIGHTING UNITS

The Insurgents at the Corvin Passage

The battles resulting in the largest number of casualties were fought along Üllői Road which separates the boroughs of Józsefváros and Ferencváros, between the grand boulevard and Nagyvárud Square, and between Boráros Square and Baross Street along the grand boulevard.

Groups of insurgents had formed in this area already during the first days of the revolution, taking up combat—as elsewhere—with bottles of fuel, machine guns, and hand grenades against the Soviet tanks. The most severe encounter took place at the intersection of the boulevard and Üllői Road; it was here that the Soviets suffered their greatest losses—some twenty to twenty-five tanks and about 150 troops. The greatest fame surrounded the group that gathered at the strategically located Corvin Movie Theater, under the command of the warehouse supervisor László Iván Kovács.³⁵ Their effectiveness was such that the Hungarian political and military leaders were contemplating the annihilation of this base, with the help of the Soviets, already on October 25; the operation, scheduled for October 28, was cancelled mainly thanks to the intervention of Prime Minister Imre Nagy. Of course, the insurgents in the neighboring eighth and ninth districts, including the soldiers at the Kilián barracks, were instrumental in the success of the group at the Corvin. Let us refer to all the groups in the neighborhood as the Corvin group.

Representatives of the group entered into negotiations with those “from the other side of the barricades” before ceasefire was declared. The Soviet high command and the representative from the Ministry of the Interior tried to convince the insurgents to lay down their arms, in exchange for safe-conduct. The leaders of the Corvin group, however, came up with a ten-point counterdemand. These indicated, among other things, that they would have preferred the writer Péter Veres to form an interim government, instead of Imre Nagy. (Indeed, Nagy was not very popular in those days, because of his declaration of martial law and the campaign mounted by Radio Free Europe against him.)

During the ceasefire negotiations the representatives of the Corvin group were given a prominent role. On a number of occasions, and at different venues, they discussed with political, military and police leaders. At Party headquarters, the side confronting the leaders of the MDP [Hungarian Workers’ Party] reached a consensus: they would recognize the government of Nagy, provided the government disbanded the ÁVH and provided those who took part in the fight were granted amnesty. They were promised that their appeal would be broadcast. Since that did not happen, there was no surrender. The majority of the insurgents agreed that they would not lay down their arms unless and until the Soviet troops withdrew from Budapest. After the withdrawal, however, they collaborated with the military and the police in restoring order. After October 31, a military-type organization became more evident. The command at the Corvin remained the most influential group until the end; it had the largest numbers of representatives on the law enforcement committees and at the meetings of the National Guard.

Despite the warning signs, the Soviet attack on November 4 caught the 1,500 to 2,000 National Guardsmen at the Corvin by surprise. They were led at this time by the agronomist Gergely Pongráz.³⁶ The invaders focused on this area first and foremost, targeting the Corvin theater and the Kilián barracks. They soon began to lay mines, against which there was no defense. Although the Corvin group had captured two or three tanks, we are not aware that these were ever used in action, although it did make good use of its five or six artillery batteries and some fifteen machine guns.

After a resistance which lasted a day or two the Corvin group and some other groups in the vicinity evacuated their base. Several smaller

groups in the area continued the armed struggle until November 7–8. During November the Corvin group disabled about six tanks, and about twenty-five to thirty combatants were killed on each side. (Of course, there were several victims among the general population as well.)³⁷

The Insurgents in the Ninth District

Two rather large groups of insurgents assembled on the other side of Üllői Road, in the heart of Ferencváros, already on October 24. One along Berzenczey Street under the command of the machinist István Wágner (alias “Göndör”—curly), which became known as the Göndör group, the second on October 25–26 on Tompa Street commanded by the toolmaker János Bárány (alias “Bordósapkás Jancsi”—Johnny with the crimson cap). These groups confronted not only the Soviet forces but, on several occasions, Hungarian police and military units as well. On October 27, at the service station on Tűzoltó [Firefighter] Street, another group was formed on the initiative of construction foreman István Angyal,³⁸ made up of some from the Berzenczey Street and other as yet unorganized fighters from the district. The three groups destroyed about ten tanks, and almost fifty Soviet soldiers fell in combat against them. Angyal and his fellow commander, the film director Per Olaf Csongovai (alias “Csolaf”),³⁹ played an important role in the ceasefire negotiations thanks to their friends and contacts with the intelligentsia. Csongovai even became a member of the Executive Committee of the National Guard. The civilian fighters were represented by the group from Tűzoltó Street at the constituent meeting of the Revolutionary Committee of Defense. Their commanders who, by the way, were much more sophisticated politically than most insurgents, openly claimed to be Communists. Among the leaders they tried to keep in touch with János Kádár first, for they considered the Party leader their best bet for consolidating a new, democratic, socialist system. On the other hand, the group from Tompa Street, according to the few sources available to us, were counting on Zoltán Tildy.

In the first half of the ceasefire period all three groups expanded or changed their base. The group from Tűzoltó Street occupied the service

station of the ÁVH across the street, the group from Berzenczey Street transferred to the dormitory for policewomen on Ferenc Square, those from Tompa Street split into two groups. One part transferred to the student hostel on Ráday Street after János Bárány got in touch with Lajos Petrák, the leader of the Revolutionary Youth Alliance—a front for the Communist MDP. Later on Petrák and his companions, more savvy politically, were able to influence Bárány. The group that stayed on Tompa Street was led by the instrument technician Lajos Mezei. Among the National Guard units formed in the district only the one on Ferenc Square adopted a military hierarchy.

The attack launched on November 4 caught the National Guard unit of the ninth district fast asleep, even though they knew that Soviet troops were filtering into Hungary continuously. The group from Tűzoltó Street clashed with the invaders on Nagyváradi Square, Üllői Road, and on Mester and Viola Streets. There were twenty-two or twenty-four ÁVH recruits within their ranks who had been taken into custody during the ceasefire. During the fighting the commanders of the groups kept trying to make contact with the Soviet military and the Hungarian political leaders to negotiate a ceasefire. They succeeded in sitting down at the table with the Soviets, but rejected the unconditional surrender offered to them as their only choice.

The Göndör group confronted Soviet troops on Ferenc Square, and on Viola Street, alongside those from Mester Street, Kálmán Thaly Street and Tűzoltó Street. Those from the Tompa Street and Ráday Street exchanged fire with the invading tanks on both sides of Ferenc Boulevard. The revolutionaries of the ninth district defended themselves against the overwhelming force for four days, with nothing but handguns and bottles of fuel. (The pressure on the Kilian barracks was so heavy already on November 4, that its defenders were forced to flee that same day. Some of them joined the civilian insurgents and fought to the end.) Armed resistance in Ferencváros had ceased for all practical purposes by November 8. The insurgents from Ferencváros set seven or eight tanks on fire during November, and both sides suffered about ten to fifteen casualties.

A small portion of the insurgents from districts eight and nine continued the struggle by producing leaflets, engaging in strikes, organizational activities.

The Insurgents in the Seventh District

The only place in the seventh district where there was a sizable resistance group in the first days of the revolution was in the area of the Eastern [Keleti] Railway Station. The headquarters of the insurgents were at number 19 Baross Square. From October 28, under the command of Gyula Pásztor and Sándor Pásztor (not related) their activities became increasingly coordinated. There are almost no sources regarding their combats in October. They were joined by a number of university students, who engaged in a great deal of propaganda activity using mimeograph machines and stencils. Other insurgents had also made use of these devices, but not to that extent. When the national guard was formed, the command of the group was taken over by the technician László Nickelsburg, but the two Pásztors continued to play important roles, as did the sewer cleaner László Balogh (alias “Pipó”). This group participated in the liberation of the inmates of the Central Prison on November 1.

Between October 27 and 29 a number of new groups were formed in the district. The district’s revolutionary committee had its headquarters in the District Council building on Csengery Street, under the chairmanship of István Hegedűs, delegated by the Party. The armed group that was led by transportation worker Lajos Steiner took up residence in the same building.⁴⁰ Thus the insurgents were influenced by several Party officials or police officers, but the composition of the group kept changing. Steiner’s group removed many secret files from one of the police stations, but there remained no time to make use of these.

The “Farkas” or “Wesselényi” group was under the command of the heat insulation installer Dezső Kovács (alias “Susogó” — whisperer or “Farkasgazda” — wolfmaster) and the technician Ferenc Drbál⁴¹; splitting from the fighters in the District Council building they first moved to the headquarters of the district police and later, on the 30th, to a building on Wesselényi Street. Since the FKgP [Smallholder Party] needed that space, they moved to Almássy Square on November 1. They exchanged this base on November 3 in favor of the Royal Hotel on the grand boulevard, for strategic reasons. Since the leaders of the group felt they could not carry out their National Guard activi-

ties without professional training, they got in touch with János Soly mosi and Colonel Károly Döbrentei, who gave them advice and guidance.

At the district police, and Party headquarters two sizable National Guard group were formed, under the leadership of police First Lieutenant László Csabai, later László Bencze, or dispatcher József Nemeskéri and Major József Drabant. The majority of the members in the first group had come over from the police, and from the military in the latter, also referred to as the Kossuth group. The groups in the district were organized into companies, sections, squads.

In addition, there were smaller armed groups stationed in the EMKE restaurant, the New York coffeehouse, the KIOSZ [National Alliance of Craftsmen] building on Hársfa Street, on Klauzál Square, and on Garai Street. Altogether some one thousand or twelve hundred freedom fighters.

The leaders of the larger groups in the district were included in the discussions regarding the formation of the National Guard. Ferenc Drbál became a member of the executive committee.

The revolutionaries of this district were preparing for the Soviet attack: on November 3 in the afternoon the district commanders of the National Guard and their military advisors met at the Baross Square base and worked out a defense plan; the meeting was chaired by Nickelsburg. They agreed that the Baross Square group would secure the area around Eastern Railway Station, the “Farkas” group would move to the Royal Hotel and, together with those at the Party headquarters, would be keeping an eye on the section between Majakovszkij Street and Rákóczi Avenue along Lenin Boulevard, as well as the area around Almássy Square. The area formed by Hársfa, Majakovszkij, Rottenbiller and Wesselényi Streets would be watched by Steiner and his group. The commanders approved the plan (albeit they could not agree on the choice of commander in chief in the district).

The resistance by the largest group, with some four to five hundred effectives, collapsed relatively early. Contributing to this may have been the fact that commander Nickelsburg—probably upon seeing the endless row of Soviet tanks on the move—changed his mind about taking up the fight. He resigned and left, since his fellow commanders did not agree with him. The tanks shot up the base and the surrounding

buildings, and most of the insurgents soon gave up the resistance, but others dispersed and caused severe losses to the Soviets along Rákóczi Avenue, at the Bethlen Movie Theater, in the City Grove and along György Dózsa Avenue. (Their bases were on Jenő Landler Street, Garai Square and in the Exhibition Hall.) Smaller units fought until November 9.⁴² According to one source, those from the Baross Square, with nothing but light weapons and bottles of gas at their disposal, inflicted mortal wounds on fifteen Soviet soldiers and destroyed three military vehicles.

The insurgents fought successfully for several days along the section of Lenin Boulevard. After November 6 the so-called Revolutionary Military Council, with Lajos Steiner, Ferenc Drbál and three other officers, guided the resistance and coordinated the activities of the groups. Their headquarters were in the building of the Ministry of Transport and Postal Services, next to the Royal Hotel. They were joined from the neighboring districts by the Vajdahunyad Street group led by József Sipos, and part of the Eötvös Street group. The insurgents, numbering about five hundred fighters in each group, resisted until November 9 or 10, then about one hundred fled to Szabadság Mountain in Buda, in the hope of continuing the fight under the command of General Király.⁴³ But it was too late for that.

Under the leadership of István Klauber there was a group of National Guardsmen from Zugló, made up of about forty or fifty men from the seventh district, armed with two machine guns. The thirty or forty fighters from the base on Thököly Avenue ambushed a Soviet unit, inflicting losses of thirty to forty troops and seven or eight tanks.

The largest number of unarmed insurgents came from the district. They were active in distributing leaflets in widely dispersed areas and in trying to organize abroad, in order to prevent the consolidation of the Kádár regime.

The Insurgents at Széna Square

The group at Széna Square was formed on October 26–27; it was to become the number one stronghold on the Buda side. They erected barricades against the Soviet tanks, reinforced by railway

cars switched over via the tram tracks from the nearby Southern Railway Station. The leader of the group was the fifty-nine-year old chauffeur, János Szabó.⁴⁴ In any case, the fighting in this area was not nearly as intense as the one at the Corvin Passage, for instance. Before the ceasefire the leaders at Széna Square contacted the officers at the Bem barracks, who in turn tried to convince them to lay down their arms. The insurgents showed no inclination to do so. Following this episode a Soviet-Hungarian attack temporarily dispersed the armed civilians from the area.

On November 4 Soviet armored detachments made their appearance at the Southern [Déli] Railway Station. The insurgents, numbering about fifteen hundred, tried to delay the Soviets. Thereafter some of their sub-units withdraw to the nearby Buda borough of Pesthidegkút. At the village of Solymár, however, the Soviet forces surrounded the group from Széna Square. Even then they did not surrender, but were able to escape, at the cost of severe losses. Thereupon János Szabó dissolved the group.⁴⁵

The Insurgents at Csepel

In the first days of the revolution the civilian insurgents were confronting not Soviet forces, but Hungarian armed units. On November 4 the Soviets immediately occupied some of the firing positions of the artillery regiment stationed at Csepel, a large industrial complex on an island in the Danube. Along these, there were others they had never relinquished since their first attack on October 26–27. The batteries remaining in Hungarian hands were gathered at strategically important positions by the command of the local National Guard. The commander of the troops was First Lieutenant Sándor Kőrösi,⁴⁶ whereas the leader of the civilians was István Buri.⁴⁷ They could not even agree on basic strategic goals, inasmuch as Kőrösi was intent only on a defensive posture, while Buri was arguing in favor of attacking the Soviet armored units passing by. Since the civilians were in the majority, they launched attacks and caused serious damage to the invaders. Finally the officers, too, joined the resistance; thanks to their relatively strong firepower (in comparison with other groups of insurgents). They even fired at Soviet aircraft. Their mortars were aimed at the runway of the mili-

tary airport at Tököl. The insurgent group, numbering about 350, disabled seven or eight tanks and hit an aircraft. Before the infantry assault, they blew up the roads leading to the area, thus delaying the Soviet attack. Later, they prevented the penetration of armored units by piling up trucks and tankers from the Csepel Ironworks. The increasingly heavy attacks by the Soviet forces once again divided the defenders; the officers saw no sense in continuing the struggle. In the morning of November 9 the Soviets eliminated all armed resistance here.⁴⁸

The Insurgents at Pesterzsébet

Across from Csepel, on the other side of the spur of the Danube dividing the island from Pest, insurgents gathered spontaneously at the boroughs of Pesterzsébet, Pestlőrinc, and Soroksár; they confronted the Soviets during the first days of the revolution, trying to prevent them from reaching the center of the city. The group at Pesterzsébet chose the chemical engineer László Oltványi⁴⁹ as their leader, eventually as the head of the district's National Guard. Other armed groups active in the vicinity joined Oltványi's group. Thus the centralization of the command of the armed revolutionaries was initiated at Pesterzsébet, even before the ceasefire.

On November 1 and 2, the National Guard at Pesterzsébet received significant military support: an anti-aircraft artillery unit with six batteries and a sharpshooter battalion with two machine guns took up positions on the Juta Hill and the Soroksár Road, to prevent the return of Soviet forces to Budapest. On November 4, after Oltványi assigned positions to the National Guardsmen, the civilian and military forces clashed with the Soviets at several locations, in a synchronized operation. They were particularly successful at the Juta Hill. In addition to handguns, the civilian forces had at their disposal, two antiaircraft batteries and one rocket launcher, and could even aim at Soviet tanks from a distance.

The freedom fighters at Pesterzsébet made the Soviet advance perilous by blowing up the asphalt cover of the road. This was where armed resistance around the capital city lasted longest; but here too they were