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# THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956

— Myths and Realities —

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## FOREWORD

Earlier versions of the essays in this volume have been published between 1994 and 2002 in various periodicals. They need to be collected not just because of their common theme—all are related to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—but also because every one of them is surrounded, enveloped, to a greater or lesser extent, by myths and legends. We must not live with illusions; it has oft been shown that to struggle against the voices of sirens, bent on enhancing some story or other or, on the contrary, to denigrate the reputation of some revolutionary hero, usually to pursue some base political motive, is a struggle like that of Sisyphus. Yet it may be a worth while enterprise, after all, to publish the results of research, factual as they may be, for there are those who, after all, are interested in the facts. Of course, the myths are interesting for their own sake, as long as we remain aware that they belong to another “genre.”

Legends surrounding 1956 were budding already in the first days of the revolution, mostly as a consequence of a dearth of information. Perhaps the best known among these is the one created in defense of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, according to which he was forced to introduce martial law and a curfew by the Stalinists, at the point of a gun.

Immediately after the defeat of the revolution by force of arms the legends, born out of despair and bitterness, often exaggerated the number of tragic endings. The most common of these was the fiction of Minister of Defense Pál Maléter’s resistance in the mountains of Bakony, which will be discussed in the essay on the Bástya csoport [Bastion Group].

As we know, in the party-state, the political leaders and their acolytes fatally falsified the goals and history of the revolution; it may be said, with some oversimplification, that they reduced the whole

revolution to the lynchings that took place on Köztársaság [Republic] Square, in front of the Party headquarters.

Since the change of regime in 1990, partly as a result of the importation of further legends from emigration, the most far-fetched and ill-intentioned fabrications have obtained signal success with the public. Perhaps the legend of the “elicited revolution” is the best known. The essence of this legend is that the Soviet leadership, with the Hungarian Party leaders in their wake, deliberately provoked the revolution, in order to deal with it. The assumption is absurd, if only because the sequence of events, down to the uprising itself, could only hurt the basic interests of the Soviet Union. Moreover, there is not a single archival source to support such an interpretation. Nevertheless, this myth has gained wide acceptance, and not only among the unread and ill-informed. The fabrications devised with a political ulterior motive became entrenched between 1992 and 1994, and again since 1998, on the initiative of the right-wing and extreme right-wing parties. Much like the works of authors under János Kádár, but with an opposite agenda, masses of writings and documentaries have appeared without any nuanced descriptions, with banal, biased interpretations.

To uncover the facts, the reconstruction of the history of armed movements in 1956 initiated from below—which is the subject of my study—I have used primarily archival sources, with the mandatory critical approach. It has become my conviction over the years, that these sources are more reliable by several orders of magnitude than the totality of oral tradition. Therefore I often become embroiled in vain disputes with those who advocate perhaps the most commonly accepted legend, according to which the trials following 1956 were on the model of the Stalinist show trials of an earlier decade. The truth is that the record of interrogations, the confessions, the testimonies, the signed denunciations allow us to reconstruct particular events, provided we remain aware that the authorities have distorted these documents in the form of charges, sentences and propaganda coups.

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I have been studying the uprising of 1956 since the change of regime in 1990. So far I have written a detailed account of happen-

ings in four areas of Budapest: Ferencváros, Angyalföld, Józsefváros and Széna Square. The chapter “The Siege of Budapest, 1956” may be considered a brief summary of a monograph yet to be written. Valid studies have already been written about the conflicting role played by József Dudás in 1956, so I have made use of secondary works in this instance, more so than in the other chapters. This chapter is the least definitive, for important sources may yet come to light.

The other studies deal with the period immediately following the defeat of the revolution. Undoubtedly the greatest debates in various media were elicited by the story of Ilona Tóth and her death sentence. Was her trial a show trial? I am engaged in an ongoing debate with various historian colleagues on this topic, with no resolution in sight.

The story and tragedy of Péter Mansfeld is perhaps the most often mentioned topic in the recollections of 1956. Not by coincidence, since he happened to be the youngest victim of the reprisals. Yet the cruelty of the reprisals cannot justify the distortions propagated even by some of our political leaders.

The chapter on the Bástyá Group deals with the resistance of that group, by participants whose names have not been forgotten.

Of course, this choice of topics must be accepted as some kind of excuse, for a number of other events from 1956 could have been included in this study, on the basis of the parameters we have set. The simple, pedestrian explanation of their omission is that the documents are in the process of being revealed, or research has not even begun. Thus this volume may be considered the first in a series.