

Hungary in 1944–1949

Juhani HUOTARI

When considering the political situation of Hungary immediately after World War II, it has to be remembered that Hungary did not operate in a vacuum and its new political calendar did not begin in the year zero when all what had happened before had been erased from the political memory.

Hungary was not a passive victim of the war in the way Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were. It had been an active agent who demanded compensation for the wrongs it had suffered in the Trianon treaty. With the first and second treaties of Vienna it gained southern Slovakia, Ruthenia (Kárpátalja) and North-Transylvania. In April, 1941 Hungary took part in the open attack against Yugoslavia and annexed Voivode. When the Germans attacked Russia on the 22nd of June, 1941, Hungary quickly joined the war. The formal cause for the declaration of war was the bombing of Kassa which may have been a provocation on the German part in order to induce the Hungarians to contribute to the war. However, the great war in the East ended disastrously for the Hungarians as the encirclement of Stalingrad closed in around the German 6th army, and the Italian, Rumanian and Hungarian armies on the flanks were grounded into pieces in winter 1942–43. The Hungarian second army led by colonel general Gustav Jány lost c. 200.000 men dead or captured. After heavy losses – and when it became clear that Germany could not win the war – the government of Hungary commenced cautious soundings of the possibilities to withdraw from the war. Since the loss of Italy and after the withdrawal of Rumania Germans occupied Hungary on the 19th of May, 1944. The move was well-founded from the military point of view: the loss of Hungary would have endangered the position of the German armies in the Balkans. The loss of the Rumanian oil-fields had already been a heavy blow and so the

deposits in the Zala region in Hungary formed the last resource of raw oil for the Third Reich. Besides, the Hungarian plains were natural operating grounds for the panzer troops. If the Russian were to invade the plains, it would bring them to the gates of Vienna.¹

Until spring 1944 Hungary had been an island of peace in Europe. In spite of setbacks on the eastern front Hungary had offered an asylum for e.g. Polish refugees. On the other hand, the holocaust of the Jews had not been extended to Hungary although the male Jewish population had been transported to labour service on the eastern front (only a few returned). Also, Hungary had not yet been heavily bombed. Since the German occupation the circumstances changed dramatically for the worse. The c. 800.000 Jews of Hungary and its annexes were confined in ghettos in April. The transportations to Auschwitz started in May and were completed in the end of June as far the countryside was concerned. The information about the fate of the Jews and of the atrocities committed by the Hungarian gendarme aroused such an international anger – e.g. the USA threatened to bomb Budapest lest the transportations were stopped – that Regent Horthy decided to halt forced transportations of the Jews to Germany for the time being. At that time only the Jews of Budapest survived.²

The approach of the front made Horthy try to withdraw once more from the war in October, 1944. The attempt ended in a coup arranged by the Arrow Cross Party (Hungarian national-socialists) of Ferenc Szálasi with the support of the Germans on 16th of October, 1944. The Socialdemocrats and moderate right-wing parties which had formerly pursued their activities legally were now forced underground. They regarded the new government as illegitimate and decided to convene a temporary national assembly in Debrecen. Elections were organized in disarray in the regions invaded by Soviet troops in December. The result fell short of anything like the committee of Lublin, a coalition government was formed, the task of which naturally was to reach armistice with Soviet Union. In view of the principle agreed on by the Allies in Teheran, the Hungarian dreams of an armistice with the Allied powers of the West turned out pure illusions. The armistice was to be concluded with the Allied power which carried the main responsibility of fighting in the area in question.³

As the actual fighting reached the Hungarian territory the land was turned into a battleground. Material damage was enormous, most of which was suffered by the capital. During the siege of Budapest, the fire from air and land destroyed 70% of its buildings. Heavy fighting on the streets completed the disaster. The evacuation procedures carried out by the Germans and their supporters in the Arrow Cross has emptied large areas of livestock and means of production. The invasion of the Russians aggravated the situation. The occupiers took as their right to confiscate all they needed from the war zone. The factory equipment and machinery transported to the East was not however taken into account when the war indemnity of Hungary was settled. The civilians who had run away from the war with the Germans were regarded by the Russians as 'fascists' and their houses and property were largely robbed and vandalized.⁴ Hungary had lost more than one million of its citizens in the war. Half of them were Jews.

Political purges were begun in summer 1945. Not only were the members of the Arrow Cross party, *Volksbund* and SS interned but the political left insisted on the purge of officialdom from the 'reactionary elements', too. This demand included also the officers of Horthy's army who had been members of the preliminary government. It was argued that they sabotaged the reconstruction and the proceedings against the war-criminals. Particular 'courts of the people' and 'detective committees' were established to sentence them, and civil servants and officials had to provide a report of their activity from the time between German occupation and liberation.⁵ In practise, the control commission set up by Soviet Union intervened both indirectly and directly in the proceedings. Direct intervention amounted for example to a demand to have Horthy's officers and the "right-wing socialdemocrat" Minister of Justice Ágoston Valentiny removed. The presence of the Soviet troops in itself often sufficed as indirect intervention, and it made it possible for the communists of Rákosi to use the 'Moscow card' in the political game against their rivals.

The starting point for Soviet Union was to regard the government in Debrecen as a democratically elected coalition government nominated by the national assembly, and the kind government the Allies had agreed on at the conference at Jalta. The Western powers did not, however, recognize it but demanded an immediate demo-

cratic elections to be held under international surveillance. The political success of the communists in the shadow of the Red Army made Rákosi overestimate the support of the left. The elections were to be held in January, 1945. In good time before them some right-wing organizations were forbidden and their members were sentenced to lose their right to citizenship. To the frustration of Moscow and the communists the clearly bourgeois Independent Small Holders' Party (FKgP) gained unconditional majority in the elections. However, this party was not given the chance to enjoy its victory in peace for Moscow stuck to the declaration of Jalta and "the broad coalition government of democratic and antifascist forces" in Hungary. For their part, the communists stated that they would not join the government without getting the post of Minister of Justice. The rise of Imre Nagy and his successor, László Rajk to hold the post of Minister of Internal Affairs, ensured that the police and internal safety of the state was firmly under the control of the communists.⁶

In order to prevent the Party of Smallholders from using their parliamentary majority the communists shifted to extra-parliamentary pressurizing tactics, e.g. by organizing demonstrations and political strikes. With the help of Socialdemocrats and National Peasants' Party (NPP) they set up the so called Left Block in February, 1946. Its main goal was to the purge of Hungarian officialdom from "reactionary elements" and it demanded that the campaign against "reactionary forces" should be extended to parliament and the governing parties. The pressurizing aroused great disagreements within the biggest governing parties. Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy, however, considered the continuation of the co-operation with the left necessary, at least as long as the control commission and occupying forces remained in the country. As the peace treaty would be in force, the occupation should end and the political cards should be dealt anew. Until then one had to wait and see and to make, for the time being, concessions to the communists. To secure that his government could work in a peaceful atmosphere Ferenc Nagy conceded to expelling a group of members from his party's parliamentary representatives which the communists had labeled as "rightist" and "reactionary". The so called "salami tactics" of Mátyás Rákosi was based on the idea that the attack should always be directed at individual politicians or smaller groups but not against

the whole of Peasants' Party itself. The purpose was to divide the opponent and in this the communists succeeded quite well. Henceforth Nagy had to fight two enemies, on the one side the united left, on the other the opposition embittered by expellings.⁷

The Hungarian post-war political reality was further coloured by the question of the position of the German population. German peasants and craftsmen had lived in Hungary since the Middle Ages. Particularly many moved in in times of Maria Theresia. For instance, Pest was until the 1830s markedly a German town. Between the world wars pangermanist and national-socialist ideas gained ground amongst Hungarian Germans, many of whom joined the Waffen-SS as volunteers when the war broke out. *Volksbund* and other similar German organizations were banned immediately after the establishment of the government in Debrecen. The Germans of Hungary were regarded as collectively guilty of the war-time atrocities. In the same way as the expulsions of Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia were begun, they were started in Hungary, too. Altogether one half of the half million German minority was expelled in 1945–49.⁸

Also the Hungarians who had remained in Northern Transylvania, Slovakia and Northern Yugoslavia suffered heavy punishments and terror after the war. It led to a difficult refugee problem, in particular amongst the Hungarians who were expelled from Slovakia by harsh methods. The Slovaks equated them with Sudeten Germans, the fate of whom they now had to share. These refugees settled mainly the lands from where the Germans had been banished. Hundreds of thousands of Hungarians were still prisoners of war and "in labour service" reconstructing the Ukraine destroyed by the war.⁹

The international situation came quickly to a head as the Allies beat their common enemies. The traditional balance of power in Europe had been shaken for Germany had for the time being ceased to be a noteworthy factor as a great power. This was the case with Italy, too, and Soviet-Russia was militarily more powerful than ever and the boundaries of states had been redrawn in Eastern Europe. The *status quo* so often emphasized by the British had shaken. The Soviet Union had also widely acquired a legendary reputation as the crusher of fascism. On its side the communists in the countries occupied by the Germans had gained themselves a halo by partaking

in the resistance movement against German occupation. It led to a communist takeover without the help of Soviet troops in Yugoslavia and Albania. Likely this would have happened in Greece, too, if the British had not intervened. The communists became a remarkable political force also in Italy and France. It was in the interests of Western powers to quickly stop this development. At Jalta the Allies had already concluded an agreement on their relative strength in control committees in defeated countries. Almost immediately after the war, already in the year 1945 Churchill complained about how the British and American representatives in control committees had been left behind the "iron curtain" in Bulgaria and Rumania. The Russian troops hindered the freedom of their movement in those countries. The answer of Stalin and Molotov to accusations was to say that the representatives of the West had exactly the same credentials in Rumania and Bulgaria as the representatives of the Soviet Union had in Italy.¹⁰

Moscow held the view that "lawful interests of security" demanded an expansion of its sphere of interest. The West had never really trusted the leadership of Soviet Union, and the monopoly in nuclear weapons gained by the United States did not in any way increase the understanding of the Kremlin towards the intentions of the West. In these circumstances, the the space for manoeuvring remained necessarily rather small for a country like Hungary. The rumours let loose in Budapest which had it that Hungary was to be mutilated in the same manner as Germany and Austria which had already been divided in zones of occupation of the West and East proved groundless in reality. It was the security of the maintenance routes of the Russian troops in Austria that was paramount in the calculations of the Kremlin when it held that Hungary must remain a link in the new Soviet zone of security.

What worried the President Zoltán Tildy and Prime Minister Nagy during the Paris Peace negotiations was the lot of the Hungarian minorities which had remained beyond the borders. One of the goals of Hungarian foreign policy was to gain at least partial revision of the pre-war borders of the country. However, Moscow's stand was steadfast: the decisions of the court of arbitration in Vienna had to be repealed and the borders returned to the pre-war lines (this applied neither to Finnish borders nor the Baltic, Poland, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina). On the other hand, it was

useless to expect sympathy from France or England; it was they who had dictated the Peace of Trianon, and the Little Entente formed by Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Serbia was their old ally. The United States was contented with general rhetorics in the matter, in practise its interest was not enough to redraw the unjust borders "somewhere in the Balkans".¹¹

Prime Minister Nagy and the rest of the leaders of the Independent Smallholders Party had conceded to adjust themselves to the communists' "salami tactics" in the hope that after the peace treaty was brought into effect the occupying troops and the control commission would leave Hungary. Afterwards it would have been possible to hold new elections and oust the communists from power. They had not, however, prepared themselves for a political bomb that went off at the end of December, 1946. The Ministry of Interior announced that the police force had been able to reveal a wide political and military plot which had been directed against the entire republican form of government. The plot was not just a fake but it did not actually pose any serious threat to the system. Rákosi, however, used it ruthlessly to his own advantage, e.g. by arguing that the leaders of the Union of Hungarian Peasants and the FKgP were involved in it. Wide-spread arrests – amongst others, the Chief Secretary and one of the main leaders of the FKgP, Béla Kovács was captured in February, 1947 – led to a panic atmosphere and mass fleeing to the West. Prime Minister Nagy was on a holiday in Switzerland as he received a phone call from Budapest: Rákosi insisted on his immediate return to his homeland to answer in front of a court to questions concerning "his part in the plot against the republic". Having, however, taken the promise that his family could freely travel to the West he handed in his resignation at the Embassy of Hungary in Bern.¹²

As a group of leading ministers and representatives of the assembly had defected to the West during the spring, the holding of early elections was regarded as necessary. When the election day dawned in July, 1947, the FKgP was in pieces, and it was rivalled not only by the left but also by a host of bourgeois small parties, who fought in the first place over the souls of Catholic voters. The polling was disturbed and in the use of absentee votes wide misconduct took place which helped the communists increase their following from the figure of 17% (1945) to 20%. The total support

of the left did not increase significantly but the communists, however, became the largest single party in the parliament. The power of the FKgP was largely expended in opposition. The communists now had a free hand to implement a wide programme of nationalization and transition to a centralized, planned economy.¹³

The establishment of the Kominform in a village called Sklarska Poręba in Polish Tatra marked a decisive turn in the policy of the Kremlin. It witnessed the end of the era of the people's front and democracy both in Hungary and in other East and Central European countries occupied by the USSR. The outbreak of the Cold War made the dangers of another great war loom large and it demanded the intensification of the class war to speed up the revolutionary process. In view of this, the Kominform opined that the change-over to a one-party system was ideologically well-grounded; all other parties than the communists obviously posed potentially a counter-revolutionary threat in the new situation.¹⁴

The building up of "the dictatorship of the proletarians" presupposed "the unity of the workers". So, the unification of the working class parties in people's democracies was accelerated – an idea which presumably did not win full-hearted favour amongst the socialdemocrats. But they were pressurized by all possible means, even open terror. The communists enjoyed their power after having suppressed their political enemies and having sent e.g. Nagy to exile. Well-trying methods could now be applied not only to the handling of the remaining political adversaries but to dealing with own allies. As a result of "the salami tactics" a part of the socialdemocrats fled abroad or became isolated from the party leadership. The remaining members acquiesced in uniting the working class parties, a step officially taken on the 12th of June, 1948. The new party was given the name Workers Party of Hungary and Árpád Szakasits was elected its chairman. Real power, however, resided with Rákosi, the Chief Secretary of the party and his deputies Mihály Farkas, János Kádár and György Marosán.¹⁵

Since the Workers Party was united the National Independence Front of Hungary was changed into the Front of Independence of Hungary. Trades' unions, youth and women's organizations, sport and other citizens associations were linked with it. After some pressurizing, peasants' and liberal bourgeois parties accepted their new role to work within the frames of the Front in autumn, 1948. In

practise in meant that their independent activities came to a halt. The confiscation of church schools accompanied by show trials of some leading bishops led to a break-up of the Catholic parties. In the elections of June 15th, 1949, the power monopoly of the Workers Party was sealed: all candidates came from the Front, and there were none to challenge them. All the same, the turnout percentage was as high as 96%, a typical figure for people's democracies.¹⁶

The break between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia led Hungary to the forefront in a campaign against Tito. The former ally had now become "the mongrel of the West" and "the minion of imperialism". This paranoid campaign presupposed a purge at home, too. One political trial followed another throughout the so called socialist camp. One victim in Hungary was the former Minister of Interior, László Rajk. The trial was held in September, 1949, and he was accused amongst other things of acting as a "triple agent" of OSS, CIA and Gestapo since 1939. Having left the Gestapo after the war he had allegedly joined the ranks of the Yugoslavian secret police.¹⁷ In all, the case of Rajk consisted of thirty trials in 1949-1951, 141 persons were imprisoned, fifteen of them were sentenced to death and executed.¹⁸ As a result the ÁVH (Hungarian secret police) was brought under the direct control of Rákosi in 1951. He alone could decide on arrests, the methods of interrogation and the length of sentences. Hungary had thus entered the era of stalinist personality cult fully adopted from the Soviet Union.

Notes

- ¹ Gosztonyi, Péter, *Légiveszély, Budapest!* (Budapest, 1989).
- ² Braham, Randolph, L., *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary, I–II* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1918).
- ³ Clemens, Diane Shaver, *Yalta* (New York, 1970).
- ⁴ Gosztonyi, *Légiveszély, Budapest!*
- ⁵ Schönwald, Pál, *Igazoló eljárások 1945–1948* (Budapest, 1973).
- ⁶ Balogh, Sándor, Jakab, Sándor, *The History of Hungary after the Second World War 1944–1980* (Budapest, 1986).
- ⁷ Vida, István, *A Független Kisgazdapárt Politikája 1944–1947* (Budapest, 1976).
- ⁸ Tilkovszky, Loránt, *Ez volt a Volksbund* (Budapest, 1978).
- ⁹ Gosztonyi, Péter, *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* (Budapest, 1992); Balogh, Sándor, *A népi demokratikus Magyarország külpolitikája 1945–1947* (Budapest, 1982).
- ¹⁰ Churchill, Winston, *Triumph and Tragedy* (London, 1953).
- ¹¹ Wolff, Robert Lee, *The Balkans in Our Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956); Lundestad, Geir, *The American Non-Policy towards Eastern Europe 1943–1947* (Oslo, 1978).
- ¹² Nagy, Ferenc, *The Struggle behind The Iron Curtain* (New York, 1948).
- ¹³ Vida, *A Független Kisgazdapárt Politikája 1944–1947*.
- ¹⁴ Gáti, Charles, *Magyarország a Kreml árnyékában* (Budapest, 1990).
- ¹⁵ Sánta, Ilona, *A két munkáspárt egyesülése 1948-ban* (Budapest, 1962).
- ¹⁶ Horváth, Csaba, *Magyarország 1944-től napjainkig* (Pécs, 1992).
- ¹⁷ Farkas, Vladimir, *Nincs mentség* (Budapest, 1990).
- ¹⁸ Horváth, *Magyarország 1944-től napjainkig*.