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Slovakia and Hungary 1956 – Documentation

Since Hungary is Slovakia's southern neighbor, there has been a lot of discussion about the 50th anniversary of Hungarian revolution in 1956. I have focused my research especially on Slovak televisions and their coverage of this event.

There are four TV stations in Slovakia. One of them, the "Slovak television," is public and the other three are commercial, including the Slovak news TV station: TA 3 (something like "Slovak CNN or BBC"). I will first present you with an interview with a renowned Slovak historian, Dr. Dušan Kováč, that was broadcasted on TA 3 on October 23, 2006. I will then present you with a short report from the commemoration day, broadcasted by the same television. Finally, I will try to summarize the presented information as well as the material I was able to get from other televisions, and analyze the results.

1.) Interview with Dr. Dušan Kováč¹, historian of the Slovak Academy of Sciences:

(TA 3, October 23, 2006: "Maďari si rok 1956 pripomenuli rôzne." ("The Hungarians remembered 1956 differently.") http://www.ta3.com/sk/relacie/5_tema-dna/287_madari-si-rok-1956-pripomenuli-r-zne October 2006)



The interview was conducted by Katarína Vítková - TA 3 reporter

Initial report on history of Hungarian revolution:

"The crowd had passionately torn down Stalin's statue and was trying to get to the building of the Hungarian radio station, in which students wanted to present their requests. They were forced to leave by the shooting members of the State security office. The Soviet army came to Hungary after midnight. The killings that lasted couple days, had started. At the end of the

month, there was an unexpected turning point. Soviet tanks left the Hungarian capital and the Prime Minister – Imre Nagy – established democratic government. However, it lasted only until November 4. Moscow responded harshly – it sent 150 thousand soldiers to Hungary. 2 500 people, who fought against communism, died, and with them, also the hope for democracy. The measures taken in following years have claimed 20 thousand lives and thousands of people escaped to the West.”

Q: Mr. Kováč, could you tell us what preceded the revolution? Which historic events took place before?

DK: I think that the main impulse for the movement in the entire socialist camp was the 20th meeting of the Soviet Communist Party. During this meeting, as we know, crimes committed during Stalinism, crimes that were part of Stalin’s cult, were revealed. This caused movement in many countries, and especially in Hungary where it was very intense. The fact that there were proofs that communist regime was criminal mobilized the whole society.

Q: We know that the revolution started on October 23, 1956. How was it initiated? What was the main sparkle that ignited the whole “revolution fire”?

DK: The whole movement had been going on for a longer time – couple months. The society was in turmoil – there were intellectuals, students of course, who were very active. Changes

were taking place. And the main problem was that Rákoci, who was and still is called the “Hungarian Stalin” didn’t want to accept any reforms or changes, so the situation was getting worse and finally there was an armed protest or insurrection. Another change took place – this time in the leading positions of the party. Imre Nagy became the leader. He came up with the reformed agenda and eventually became the symbol of this revolution. The situation was getting more dramatic from day to day and at the end, the protesters met with Soviet tanks.

Q: Do we know about the requests of the protesters? Could you say what they were?

DK: The requests were very different. We couldn’t say that the whole movement was coordinated right from the beginning. There were quite radical requests, which wanted to change the whole system, which of course, outraged the Hungarian communists and their Soviet counterparts led by Khrushchev.

On the other hand, there were also requests to reform the system...

Q: Some historians say that the requests of the protesters were unreal for that time period. What do you think about it?

DK: Well, they were unreal because the protesters certainly did not have the strength to push them through in such a divided world, as it was in 1956. And, as it was also proven, they had no chance with a world power that was so well armed. They weren't able to resist the tanks and thousands of soldiers...

Q: Where is the turning point of this revolution? We know that at one point, the demonstrations and protests calmed down. Why did the Russians intervene in such a cruel way then?

DK: As always, also now the reaction was rushed. We know that Khrushchev was a politician who revealed Stalin's cult and he himself was talking about some changes. Probably, the situation got out of his control and he became worried that Hungary, as a result of its quite radical requests, will get released from Soviet sphere of influence. That's probably why the Soviet leadership

decided to subdue the whole revolution in a rather radical, military way.

Q: We know that the Red Army suppressed the revolution militarily, after two weeks. What happened then? What were the reprisals? Which measures were taken afterwards?

DK: The Soviet army mastered the situation. The reformed communists came to power – János Kádár was a secretary of the Communist party then. Many people died during the fights, but the measures taken against those who took part in the revolution were even crueler and harsher afterwards. Many people were shot, often without a trial. Naturally, there was a massive exodus from the country. The estimates say that about 200 000 Hungarians left Hungary at that time and dispersed themselves into the whole world. And of course, it was also the intellectual elite that fled.

Q: Hungary is now celebrating the 50th anniversary of the revolution. Are there some new facts that were revealed after those 50 years?

DK: Historians always bring in something new. It's always possible to find something, but I think the main

assessment was done by Hungarian historians couple years ago, when they defined this insurrection or protest as a revolution. The goal of the revolution was i.e. the change of the system. We can have new details but the basic evaluation has been made already.

Q: Some historians say that the Hungarian protests did not have to end up like they did – under the tanks. What do you think about it?

DK: We can always set up such a hypothesis. It is true that if the reformist movement had been restrained, maybe it would have had a chance... after all, Kádár's regime came to force after the protests were subdued, and it did take some reformist steps, which were known in the entire socialist camp. It is however very hard to say if it were possible to prevent this from happening. Plans usually don't work out exactly as we imagine.

Q: Let's look at the current situation. Why hasn't even the anti – communist revolution united Hungarians today? The crowds demonstrate in Budapest...

DK: Hungarian society is most likely divided to certain degree. The rightists –

Fidesz, who want to knock down this government, are using every opportunity to demonstrate against the government, and that is now the priority for the society. However, I don't think that comparing the revolution of 1956 to the current situation is good. If Fidesz claims that Gyurcsány and socialists are the ones who suppressed the revolution and the people, it is not correct, to say the least. The current internal political struggle has, so to say, beaten the unity that the revolution brought... because I am convinced that Hungarian society is united in its opinion regarding the revolution.

Q: Are there then, any parallels between the current situation and the year 1956?

DK: Definitely not. In 1956, it was a totalitarian regime, struggle against totality, against Hungary's incorporation into the Soviet camp. Today, it is an internal political struggle within Hungary. And those are two different things.

Q: I've read that even now, there are different views of the revolution. What are they?

DK: Yes, there are different views because even the agenda in 1956 was

different... so it can be different today as well. It can be a view of reformed communists, it can be a view of those who see the revolution as an anti – totalitarian movement, which wanted a democratic society and of course, there can also be different opinions as to the necessity of having such radical requests... some people ask if it hadn't been wiser to implement gradual reforms... but all of these views and perspectives are legitimate in evaluating such and event.

Q: Last question: Could you shortly tell us what was the difference between the year 1956 in Hungary and the year 1968 in our country?

DK: The main difference was that Hungarian society, in contrast with Czechoslovak society, was naturally anti – Soviet. They considered USSR to be the “unwanted protector” and the Soviet

tanks were the sign of occupation. Also, it happened 12 years before 1968, right after Stalin's crimes were revealed. Therefore, it was very emotional. On the other hand, the requests in Czechoslovakia in '68 were also unfeasible, and the expectation that the West or the United States would come to help these countries was a common illusion in both cases. Nevertheless, the events in Czechoslovakia didn't lead to any real revolution against the troops of the Warsaw Pact. Instead, there was silent resistance; there were no fights. It was more of a suppression of ideas than of insurgent fighters. Even those 12 years that passed between 1956 and 1968 caused the agenda of Czechoslovakia to be more mature, full – grown, even though there were also tendencies not only to reform, but also to change the system... but Dubček's reformist activities were dominant.

TA 3: Short Report (October 23, 2006, different part of the same discussion)

Let's see what Budapest looked like today.

The celebrations in front of the barricades at the Kossuth square did not seem to show the united Hungarian nation from 1956.

An elderly lady: *“The government shouldn’t be celebrating today, but on the 4th of November, when the revolution was suppressed. The same people who sit there today were beating us then.”*

In the meantime, statesmen started to assemble in front of the Parliament in order to see the guards in historic uniforms. They did not hear the sounds from the street. They were guarded by more than 1000 policemen. Slovakia was represented by our president, Ivan Gašparovič. The surrounding streets were filling with the increasing anger of the protesters that were not allowed to enter the Kossuth square.

An elderly gentleman: *“It is a tragedy that we can’t celebrate our national anniversary together, under our flag... just because of Gyurcsány!”*

The protesters blocked the main Rakoci Street, and started to move toward Korvin’s Square, where the revolution headquarter was in 1956. They were later pushed out by the police, who didn’t mind using tear gas. Not all Hungarians agree with the protests though.

One gentleman: *“Today’s political scene is a different story. People should learn from 1956, especially how to reach consensus.”*

The Hungarians also remembered the revolution on the “Road of Remembrance,” which was supposed to bring the revolution closer especially to young people. On this road, people met young revolutionaries, Soviet soldiers, but also those who were suffering.

Summary

I decided to translate the two materials because I consider them interesting. The interview with Dr. Kováč shows us one way of interpreting the Revolution. He was trying to emphasize the fact that the Hungarian revolution was indeed a revolution, meaning: fighting was involved and there was a real and bloody clash between the protesters and the Soviets. He also pointed out that the requests of the protesters were unreal for the time period, yet at the same time, we shouldn’t generalize because not all of the views were the same. I also liked how Dr.

Kováč showed that the revolution of 1956 was very different from current situation. Even though some people would like to make it simple and say that the revolution and the status quo are the same, it is different to protest against totalitarianism and to protest within democratic system. The underlying topic for both is certainly morality. We could discuss whether it is moral that Gyurcsany hasn't resigned. On the other hand, it is important to know that there will be democratic elections, in which people will be able to "send the government home." The last thing I would like to mention is Dr. Kováč's comparison of Hungarian revolution and Prague spring. This is also connected to the question that was raised during our discussion whether Hungarian revolution was a starting point for protest movements that happened later on. From what was said during the interview, we could conclude that even though there were some similarities between the two protest movements, there were also many differences. Every country is specific: the protesters are different, and so are the circumstances. Therefore, we should always keep in our minds the particularities of every protest – even the fact that something happens 12 years later (or even less than that) makes it different – because the society and the conditions also change. The nature of the protests was also very different. Therefore, we could compare, but we shouldn't just simply generalize.

The second, much shorter, report deals with the issue of remembrance. Remembering the revolution in Hungary 2006 was very specific especially because of the demonstrations that were taking place. After watching and rewriting all of the reports that were presented by the Slovak televisions, (which I did not translate to English, since it would have at least 20 or more pages) I could make some final remarks:

- 1.) The discussions that took place usually dealt with the current situation, more than the history. While it is true that most of the reports mentioned the actual historic background, (they talked at least briefly what the revolution was about), most of them only mentioned and showed the official ceremony and then the demonstrations.
- 2.) The view of the protesters was a little bit different. While most of the televisions depicted the protesters as victims that were treated rather harshly by the police, some of them also talked about them as of vandals. Most of the televisions however, tried to offer differing views on the current protests. They usually presented about two people speaking in favor and one or two people speaking against the protests.

3.) The picture material was also important. Most of the time, these TVs were showing either protesters with their flags shouting and making noise, or the policemen beating the people, shooting and trying to reprimand them. Almost none of the TVs (except for one) made a calculation that would show how many people out of the entire Budapest population are actually in favor of the protests. (In other words: is 10 thousand a lot in comparison to 2 million?). Therefore, sometimes they created an impression that the whole country is united in trying to make Gyurcsany resign.

4.) While focusing on the demonstrations, many televisions forgot to mention (or mentioned it just very briefly) the other sides of the commemoration day, such as the Road of Remembrance. Many ordinary people celebrated in a rather calm and peaceful way.

In conclusion, I would just like to mention a short interview I have made with my friend from Hungary. She is now in England, so her view is particularly interesting. First of all, she doesn't agree with the protests, especially with their violent form. She also thinks that there has been too much of an emphasis put on the "darker side" of the Revolution anniversary. She pointed out that there is for example a new Hungarian movie, coming out, that deals with the issue of Hungarian revolution. It's called: "Szabadsag szerelem," – its English title is Children of Glory (even though the literal translation would be: Freedom, love.) It is a story of a water polo player, playing for Hungary at the 1956 Olympics, and a girl - revolutionary, fighting for freedom during the revolution. The revolution started right after Hungary beat USSR in water polo. For more information and pictures I suggest the website of this movie:

<http://www.szabadsagszerelemafilm.hu/>

ⁱ The picture of D. Kováč comes from the Slovak Academy of Sciences website:
http://www.sav.sk/index.php?lang=sk&charset=&doc=org-user&user_no=2571 ,October 2006

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