

Agnieszka Niezgoda

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(Polish) Hungarian Revolution

Review of the exhibition “Warsaw - Budapest 1956”, 23rd of October – 30th of November in Warsaw.

The memory of the Hungarian Revolution is much cherished in Poland. There are conferences and exhibitions, as well as official and informal meetings with Hungarian and Polish contemporary witnesses organized in many Polish cities. I have chosen the exhibition “Warsaw - Budapest 1956” to concentrate on, since it is a very typical example of how the anniversary of the Hungarian protest is commemorated in Poland. In my review, I give a closer look on the exhibition; I also interpret its contents and structure.

The “Warsaw - Budapest 1956” is an open air exhibition taking place in the center of Warsaw, close to the old town market, where some other exhibitions (e.g. “Life in the People's Republic of Poland”) have been organized in the last few months. It has been prepared by the KARTA Center (Ośrodek Karta) and the History Meetings House (Dom Spotkań z Historią).

The exhibition consists of about 30 photos, taken by individual contemporary witnesses and press agencies. Apart from the pictures, there are records from students who took part in the protest, an excerpt from the diary of M. Dąbrowska (a Polish novelist), passages from speeches of Władysław Gomułka (the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party) and his Hungarian counterpart János Kádár, as well as reports of some army officers. Moreover, the exhibition includes a few accounts from the Poles who supported the Hungarian protest, press articles and satiric posters. The historical comment is limited to a few sentences on the background of the protest at the beginning of the exhibition, and on the number on victims at its end.

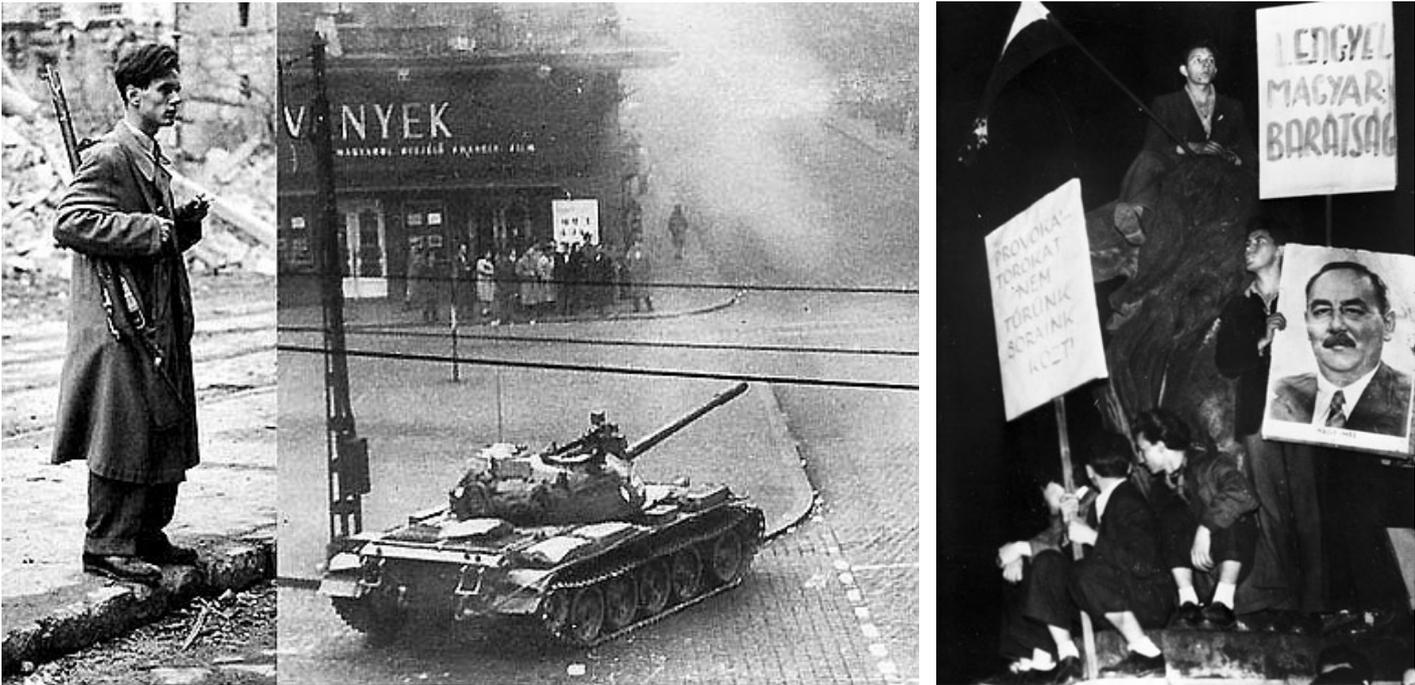
This collage way of portraying the Revolution is very similar to the concept of the “Topographie des Terrors” monument in Berlin. It can be argued if this is a good method of presenting individual subjective visions of history: it is impossible to render the experience of a single person in a logical, coherent and generalized historical account.

Concerning the content of the exhibition, generally seen, the Polish aspect of the revolution is very much stressed. It could not be otherwise if the authors wanted to give a thorough depiction of the event, since the Hungarian uprising broke out in support of the protest in Poland, the so called “Polish June”: the first demonstration took place at the General Józef Bem statue, who was a Polish freedom fighter from the period of the Spring of Nations (1848). However, in the exhibition even the facets of the Polish history which are not directly connected to the Hungarian Revolution have been emphasized. The whole exhibition begins with a photograph of Władysław Gomułka and another one depicting Warsaw in the 1950s. Furthermore, it is underlined that Poles supported the fighting Hungarians: they were blood donors; some of them even took an active part in the uprising. It is worth mentioning, that also other exhibitions organized in Warsaw stress the Polish aspect of the protest.

How does the focus on the Polish facet of the protest influence the remembrance of the events in Hungary? It can be assumed that the memory of the Hungarian uprising in Poland is so vivid mainly because of its “Polish part”: the support which Poles lent to it and the Hungarians’ support for the Polish protest. It is due to stress on the Polish engagement, that the Hungarian Revolution is not seen as something distant and insignificant. It becomes a part of *our* history and *our* cultural remembrance. Therefore it lasts.

Another important aspect of the exhibition refers to the fact that it does not include any information about the situation in the Soviet Union. The whole Soviet context of the intervention is left out. The protest, as it is portrayed, is not so much *against* (the Soviet dominance, communism, etc.) as it is *for* (freedom). In other words: there is no “enemy” in those pictures.

Why is the Soviet part not mentioned? Supposedly, the answer to this question can be found in the fact that the exact portraying of the political background in the Soviet Union is not possible in a short exhibition like this one. And a short passage on the subject will have to result in the implied very negative judgment of the country and its leaders. Perhaps the exhibition organizer wanted to avoid imposing such direct evaluation on the exhibition viewer. Perhaps they just did not want to simplify the history presenting it in black and white.





Sources:

Some of the photos presented at the exhibition.

http://www.mhw.pl/mhw/index.jsp?place=articleEdit&news_cat_id=93&layout=1; (entry date: 31.10.2006)

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