



Introduction

The years from 1949 to 1953 were among the gloomiest in modern Hungarian history. The population experienced bloody and blind terror, a declining standard of living and an impoverished intellectual life. After the death of Stalin in March 1953 the situation improved somewhat and the disintegration of the regime, which led to the great revolution of 1956, began. The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the functioning and then disintegration of a totalitarian political entity.

Historians of Hungary have long debated whether the fate of the country had been decided already in 1945 at the moment when the Red Army succeeded in defeating the last remnants of the Hungarian and German armies. Conservative commentators have claimed that a multi-party democracy never had a chance, since the Soviet leadership, that is Stalin, was already determined to impose communist dictatorship everywhere the Red Army was in occupation. Others, including this author, have assumed that Stalin did not have a clear vision of the future in 1945, beyond the decision that Soviet power and influence should be further expanded in Europe and that no hostile state should be established on any Soviet border, in particular the very sensitive western borders of the country. Within these limits various possibilities still existed. According to this view, the two or three years following the conclusion of the war were a period of experimentation. As far as Eastern Europe was concerned, it was an era of flawed and already obviously endangered pluralism.

The dividing line among historians was not so much in evaluating the period of transition, 1945–1948, but the attitude to the pre-war regime. Conservatives saw little that was positive as a consequence of the victory of the Red Army. They were more or less comfortable with the extremely socially unequal, and nationalist, inter-war era, associated with the Governor of Hungary, Admiral Nicholas Horthy. We will never know, of course, whether Hungarian democrats would have been

able to build a Western-type democratic polity without the intervention of the Red Army. The choice was not necessarily a Western-type democracy or a communist totalitarian regime. Conservative, nationalist forces were in retreat in 1945, but if Soviet forces had indeed withdrawn, as was expected by most observers at the time, it is likely that conservatives and nationalists would have regained some of their former strength. Liberal politicians and thinkers had existed in Hungary but liberalism was by no means the major intellectual current.

Liberals evaluating the ever-changing and dramatic period of the immediate postwar years saw much that was positive. They regarded the destruction of the semi-feudal Horthy regime as a major accomplishment, a genuine social revolution. Among liberals it was István Bibó who better than anyone else articulated a moderately positive point of view. He famously considered the best years of his life and that of the nation to be 1945–1948. He saw the dangers that threatened the possible Hungarian democratic experience. In an essay, “The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy,” published in the journal *Valóság* in December 1945, he made clear the difficulties, but at the same time he saw possibilities for a better Hungary and he had hope.¹ It was for liberals that the establishment of a full-blown communist totalitarian order was the most disappointing: their hopes had been crushed.

The future state of Europe was still in flux. It is at least conceivable that as late as 1946 Stalin may have hoped that through the strong French and Italian communist parties the Soviet Union could extend its influence in Western Europe. He may have envisaged the future on the basis of the past: different countries would compete for influence, but now, after the great victory of the Red Army, Soviet influence would be vastly greater. If he had hopes for such an outcome, then he had to allow at least a modicum of pluralism in his Eastern European empire.

The future of Eastern Europe, including that of Hungary, was decided in Washington and Moscow. Eastern Europe was the first victim of the Cold War. In retrospect it is evident that the cooperation of the two mutually hostile camps could not survive. Trying to establish order after the devastation of the war, the Soviet leadership decided to reimpose the harshest discipline at home. It benefitted from the threat of another international confrontation justifying the renewed

¹ István Kemény, “Bibó István és a Magyar demokrácia,” *Uj Látóhatár*, 1–4 (1982), p. 101.

repression. That regime could not have survived an open intellectual exchange with the Western world. It is also difficult to envision that the Western powers, the United States and Britain, at that particular time could have accepted the Soviet Union as a partner. In retrospect it is clear that the coming of the Cold War was as inevitable as anything in history could be. However, contemporary observers could not see that as clearly as those who can view events after the fact.

No totalitarian order can be introduced all at once. The creation of preconditions had to be an extended process. What seem to us to be the decisive turning points on the road to Sovietization might not have seemed so to contemporaries. What they saw was a series of crises. They saw the communists taking more and more energetic steps against their enemies, they saw a gradual diminution of artistic and economic freedom. They were like the proverbial frog in the cauldron: the water was getting hotter and hotter all the time. Mátyás Rákosi, the leader of the Hungarian communists, famously described the strategy of his party as salami tactics. He meant that the opposition was not to be eliminated at once, but communist forces could slice away pieces until ultimately nothing remained. The salami was eaten. Rákosi was giving himself too much credit. In reality the gradual elimination of all possible opposing forces was not the consequence of a carefully drawn-up plan. As international politics changed and the Cold War developed, Soviet policies changed as well. The communists in Eastern Europe were allowed, encouraged and ordered to take ever more energetic steps against their opposition. The developments in Hungary were very much in line with what was happening in the other Eastern European countries occupied by Soviet forces.

Whether Rákosi had a well-defined plan or not for achieving his goal of a totalitarian society, the events that took place in the immediate post-war years were preconditions for such a result. First of all, by the removal from political competition of all forces that had been compromised by the slightest collaboration with the old regime, the political spectrum became narrower. Even more importantly, gradual nationalization of the economy, land reform and, almost immediately after that, collectivization, removed the economic basis of any further opposition.

The communists, under Rákosi's leadership, by means fair or foul, wanted to extend their power without limit and to establish a political order that was based on their deeply held ideology. The question was

whether they would be allowed to do so by their Soviet masters. In 1945 and 1946 they were willing participants in a multi-party government. Of course, they used their power to weaken the major opposition political force, the Independent Small Holder Party (Független Kisgazda Part, FKGP). They attacked the right wing of the FKGP in the hope of dividing the party.² Rákosi and his comrades in this period had no choice but to carry out genuine negotiations with their opponents. Aside from the decisive support of the Red Army, which occupied the country, they also benefitted from their ability to organize at least a segment of the working classes, which then could be counted upon to come onto the streets and demonstrate for some policies advocated by the communists. The problem was that the communist control of these demonstrations at least in the early months was not reliable and these demonstrations could turn against Jews, democrats, and politicians of all sorts. It is difficult for us, who know how the struggle turned out, to accept that for contemporaries, communist and anti-communist alike, political developments were not so clear.

We have good information concerning the correlation of the political forces in postwar Hungary. In the first election carried out after the war, the Hungarian people clearly expressed their political preference by choosing a moderate right-wing political party, the FKGP. In November 1945 elections that party gained 57 percent of the votes. The playing field of Hungarian politics after the war, however, was never even. Soviet pressure allowed the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP) to take control of the political police. This institution would have a major role in the liquidation of all democratic political parties. The communist leaders succeeded in removing a number of FKGP members after they had declared that these people had been compromised by their actions during the war. The FKGP party constantly had to apologize; it was put on the defensive by communist attacks. The communists, under the defensive umbrella of the Soviet army, were invulnerable. In February 1947 the communists accused the chairman of the Party, Béla Kovács, of being a member of an anti-democratic conspiracy. The accusation was without foundation. When the FKGP-dominated parliament refused to lift his immunity, the Soviet authorities arrested Kovács. This was

² Maria Palasik, "A szalámi taktika első szakasza," *Társadalmi Szemle*, 8–9 (1995), p. 145.

a decisive step. After that moment, the strongest anti-communist political force ceased to be an independent organization. Under pressure the FKGP was forced to exclude thirty-two deputies who were accused by the communists of being “counterrevolutionaries.” The communists maintained the absurd proposition that the Party that won the election was at the same time conspiring to overthrow that political order in which they were the dominant force. Zoltán Tildy, the president, and Ferenc Nagy, the premier, made concession after concession in hopes of preserving a semblance of democratic order. However, in the middle of 1947 it was evident that this strategy would not work any longer.

The political death of the FKGP occurred in June 1947 when Nagy was compelled to resign.³ This was the end of imperfect pluralism. The leadership of the FKGP was now in the hands of communist stooges. The communists chose a premier, Lajos Dinnyés, who was nominally an FKGP member but without any support within his party. Nagy, who had been vacationing in Switzerland, was accused of being part of a conspiracy and was forced to resign. The removal of Ferenc Nagy, the last democratically elected Hungarian premier, took place at a time when the Cold War was getting worse. As the French and Italian communists were removed from government in their respective countries, Stalin and his comrades lost hope that they would be able to influence Western European politics from within and consequently felt little need to be concerned about Western protests concerning what was happening in the countries that could fairly be described as satellites of the Soviet Union. According to the available documents the initiative for carrying out this minor coup came from Rákosi, but of course he needed Soviet approval. With the removal of Nagy, the coalition government remaining in office became a mere pretense.

The most significant moment on the road to a totalitarian society was probably not even noticed by contemporaries. It happened in September 1947. A meeting took place in Szklarska-Poreba, a small tourist town in Poland. In addition to representatives from all the satellite countries, French and Italian communist leaders had also been invited. Mihály Farkas and Jozsef Révai represented the MKP.

³ Mátyás Rákosi, *Visszaemlékezések*, vol. 2. Budapest: Napvilág, 1997, pp. 375–380 (henceforth ‘Rákosi’). Stalin sent a handwritten letter to Rákosi. According to him Nagy was consulting with the Americans concerning the removal communists from the government. He implicitly instructed Rákosi to remove Nagy from the government,

Stalin sent two senior members of the leadership to the conference, Andrei Zhdanov and Georgii Malenkov. At first the representatives of the participating countries described their policies and their speeches gave the impression that they still held to the principle that there were “different roads to socialism.” All this changed at the conclusion of the gathering when Zhdanov described the international situation as threatening. He said the world was now divided into two camps, and that necessitated new policies. Whatever Soviet policy may have been up to this point, now the Soviet leaders made it explicit: The Soviet leadership would synchronize policies concerning the satellites. The speed of progress on the road to socialism had to be increased. By implication the Czechoslovak coalition, headed by non-communist Edvard Benes, could not continue. Indeed, the Czechoslovak communists carried out a coup in February 1948. Furthermore, no communist country would be allowed to pursue an independent foreign policy. No satellite country could take advantage of the Marshall Plan.

The instrument of synchronization was the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau). In 1943, Stalin had dissolved the Comintern (Communist International) in order to allay the allies’ fear of a coordinated international communist movement. The Cominform differed from the Comintern inasmuch as it was to be limited to the Eastern European satellites. It became evident that the presence of the representatives of the French and Italian Parties was necessary in order to make it clear to them that there could be no more middle road between the Soviet bloc and the imperialists. It is unclear what the envisaged role of the Italian and French communists was to be under the circumstances. The new organization was to have its center in Belgrade. That turned out badly, since within a year, the Yugoslavs were expelled from the bloc. Ironically, the main accomplishment of the Cominform was to exclude Tito from the communist bloc. In 1948, the central offices of Cominform moved to Bucharest and remained there until it was officially dissolved in 1956. The Cominform had an official publication: *For Lasting Peace and People’s Democracy*. The title of the journal was thought up by Stalin himself.⁴ The organization had no particular importance because the Soviet leaders continued to deal with individual countries separately. The idea that the satellite

⁴ Géza Mezei, “Stetintol Triestig,” *Valóság*, 31 (1989), p. 7.

countries would consult with one another was contrary to Soviet interests.

The Eastern European communist leaders understood that they no longer needed to pay attention to Western sensibilities and protests. Now they were ready to repress all non-communist forces. The communist bloc, with its extraordinary uniformity, was born.⁵ The representatives of the communist parties returned home with the realization that the Soviet leadership had ended the era of “imperfect pluralism,” when Western protests had to be considered. Reading the reports and discussions at the conference we get an idea of Soviet politics at the time and expectations of behavior of the leadership among the local communist parties. It was clear that the decision was made that the communists could no longer cooperate with the socialists and that the socialist parties would have to be eliminated. On the other hand, there was as yet no expectation that there would be complete nationalization of industry and collectivization of agriculture.⁶ The exact copy of the Soviet model was still in the future.

On the path to complete domination of the political life of the nation the first task was the destruction of the FKGP. It was accomplished by charging its leaders with an imagined conspiracy. The second task was the destruction of the Hungarian Socialist Party, Magyar Szocialista Part (MSzP). This took place a little later, by demanding a unification of the two working-class parties. The socialist leadership, unlike the communist, had always been divided over the question of relations with the other workers’ party. Some socialists were suspicious of the communists’ allegiance to Moscow, while others were actually crypto-communists. For example, Sándor Ronai in 1945 had wanted to switch parties and join the communists. He was dissuaded by the argument that he could help the communist cause better by staying in his post for the time being. The gap between left-wing and right-wing socialist leaders had been wide, at least since the end of World War I. Moderate socialist leaders, such as Károly Peyer, opposed cooperation with the communists already at the time of the Hungarian Socialist Republic of 1919. By contrast, Árpád Sakasits and György Marosán did everything within their power to move the Party to the

⁵ Károly Lipkovich, “A Tájékoztató Iroda létrehozása. Fordulat kezdete a kommunista mozgalomban,” *Múltunk*, 3–4 (1989).

⁶ *Ibid.*

left. Going back to the creation of the Comintern, the entire communist movement had always taken a hostile attitude to the socialists. The animosity that the communist leaders felt for the socialist leaders was almost personal. On occasion they found it easier to understand the mentality and politics of “bourgeois” politicians than of the socialists. There could be no two “working-class” parties, regardless of the policies adopted by the socialists. The MSzP had to disappear. As long as there was a functioning socialist party there could be no totalitarian politics, however accommodating the socialist leaders might be. Gradually, by increasing political pressure the communists succeeded in removing from the socialist leadership not only right-wing socialists, such as Károly Peyer, but all leading figures from the center of the party, those who wanted to retain a degree of independence in the ever-changing political life of the nation. This included such admirable figures as the courageous Anna Kéthly. In vain did the socialists support the communist position in all intra-party conferences. The hostility of the communist leadership to the socialists did not abate. Among the workers the communists agitated against the socialists.

The decision to destroy the MSzP was made in Moscow. In the course of 1947, it became clear to Soviet leaders that no third road, no intermediate positions between the Soviet and the hostile Western world, could exist, so the fate of the MSzP was sealed. The question remained whether the MSzP should be dissolved or accept incorporation into the MKP. In reality that distinction was small. It meant that some of the left-wing socialist leaders would be able, at least temporarily, to join the communist leadership. In March 1948 the two parties were fused. Even the name of the Party was decided in Moscow. The new party was named the “Party of the Hungarian Workers,” Magyar Dolgozók Partja (MDP). The communists set up committees to examine which socialists would be allowed to join the united party. The new party, that is, the old MKP, took over the property of the socialists. Remarkably, although Szakasits became the nominal chairman of the Party, his previous writings could not be republished. He was a figurehead who could not and did not long remain in his post.

The leaders of the major political parties of the post-war period, the Hungarian Peasant Party, the Small Holders and the socialists all were willing to make concessions in the hope that they would be able to operate and act as a restraint on communist policies. By contrast, the Catholic Church, a major political and social power, was unwilling to

compromise. It was clear from the beginning that the Church under the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Mindszenty would act as a powerful foe as long as it could. The communists well understood the influence of the priest in the villages and therefore they had to proceed cautiously. As far as ideological opposition was concerned, none was more important than the Church.

The cardinal was a genuine reactionary. He was rebelling not only against godless communist rule, but against the modern world. The cardinal refused to accept that Hungary had ceased to be a kingdom. In fact, Hungary had no king after the end of World War I, even though the country remained a kingdom in name. The conservative ruling class regarded a republic as something excessively democratic and modern. The head of state, Admiral Horthy, had named himself Governor and regarded himself as a regent. Mindszenty also objected to land reform, in particular the loss of the enormous landed wealth of the Church. He certainly would not have felt comfortable in any of the democratic, liberal Western countries.

It was predictable that the new rulers would make every effort to combat their most dangerous opponent, the Catholic Church. The most significant area of struggle was the field of education. The regime abolished Catholic Youth organizations, claiming that they were infected with a reactionary spirit. An even more significant issue was the nationalization of church schools. The struggle against the influence among the youth was most significant and the communists proceeded step by step. First, they introduced a monopoly on the publication of textbooks, thereby ensuring control of what was being taught. Second, they made participation in religious education voluntary. At each step the cardinal protested, but protested in vain. Although he did not prevail, he still was able to mobilize public opinion against the godless communists. He explicitly repudiated the Western example, where voluntary religious education in schools was the norm. As late as 1947 the Church was still capable of organizing demonstrations in defense of compulsory religious education. The strength of the Church was demonstrated by the fact that the nationalization of schools created greater resistance than the nationalization of factories or land reform. The cardinal promised excommunication for those who voted for nationalization in the parliament and forbade priests and nuns to continue to work in nationalized schools. In spite of his strenuous resistance the cardinal was bound to lose. In December 1948

Cardinal Mindszenty was arrested. In prison he was tortured. His trial was one of the phony purge trials in which the communist authorities already had abundant experience and tradition. Although international public opinion paid a great deal of attention to what was happening to the cardinal and the Catholic Church, by this time, given the international situation, the Hungarian communist authorities did not have to pay a great deal of attention. The construction of a totalitarian order now was complete.

The fate of the small Eastern European countries has been very much influenced by great power politics, by actors on the international scene much more powerful than themselves. However, at no time was the autonomy of the Hungarians as limited as it was in these years. Moscow determined not only who should lead the regime, but interfered even in mid-level appointments. The Soviet leaders were fairly well informed concerning what was happening in Hungary through their diplomats and numerous agents, who were constantly reporting. Nevertheless, far removed from the scene, having little understanding or even interest in Hungarian traditions and mentality, they made errors that greatly contributed to the coming of the revolution. Consequently, while discussing this period, we constantly have to look at Soviet history. What was happening in Budapest could not be separated from what was happening in Moscow.

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 was a major event in modern history and therefore, understandably, there is a large literature available on this topic, not only in Hungarian, but also in Western languages, most voluminously in English. However, most of these studies discuss the 1949–1956 period in Hungarian history as a background to the coming revolution. In this study we attempt to look at this period as an entity, something different from the Horthy regime, from the immediate postwar period, and also from what came after the defeat of the revolution, a period that we identify with the communist leader, János Kádár. We speak of the interwar years as the “Horthy regime” and what came after 1956 as the time of János Kádár. The years 1948–1956 are inevitably connected with the name of the person who put his mark on what was happening in Hungary, namely Mátyás Rákosi. It was in 1948 that Rákosi came to dominate political, cultural and social life and his influence lasted until his removal in June 1956. It is difficult to characterize this period, because it was

a time of constant, rapid and unpredictable changes. It included the years of bloodiest terror, 1950–1953, and also months of great optimism and very much welcomed freedom of expression in 1956. It demonstrated the imposition of a totalitarian model and also its disintegration.