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Was Failure the Only Option?

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Charles Gati: *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt*. Washington D.C., Woodrow Wilson Center Press- Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 264 pp.

It was to be expected, especially in light of the general elections held in April 2006, with the Socialist-Free Democrat coalition winning, that celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution was not going to be a straightforward ceremonial event. Even if there had been an honest squaring up to the sins of communism in Hungary, it would have been hard enough for those who took part in the Revolution, as well as their descendants, to commemorate 1956 alongside members of the successor parties of the Hungarian Workers' Party, that is the Communist Party, which had provoked the revolution with its catastrophic policies, and of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, which had presided over the merciless retributions that followed in its wake.

Less than a month before the anniversary a confidential talk by Prime Minister Gyurcsány was leaked, and that led to a deep political and moral controversy. As a divided country looked back on its **past**, a fitting celebration of the anniversary was marred by demonstrations and police violence. Old questions such as who 1956 belongs to became even more timely. Does the Revolution's glory belong to the "reform Communists" and disillusioned ex-Communists, or is the popular uprising an epic of the overthrow of communism? The heroic demeanour that Imre Nagy displayed during his imprisonment in 1957 and 1958, and his consciously accepted martyrdom that are beyond dispute, but how did he perform during the dramatic days of the Revolution followed, itself? It must never be forgotten that Moscow, which is to say Khrushchev and the other Soviet leaders, double-crossed and overthrew a lawful Hungarian government. But why, at a time when the Kremlin was publicly breaking with Stalin's legacy and advocating peaceful coexistence, did they come to that decision? Could events in Budapest have taken

Comment [x1]: Drága Zsófi, nem lehetünk ennyire tapintatosak: az öszödi beszéd fokozta végletessé a megosztottságot és vezetett a tüntetésekhez - ebben nem lehet vita. És ezt írtam le!

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a different course and could the military attack that was launched on November 4th have been avoided? And not least, did the West, and especially the United States, do everything they could have done? Might there have been a way, short of unleashing a Third World War, of averting the brutal crushing of a Hungary that was in the process of liberating itself?

Traditional views of history would say that history can only deal with things that actually happened. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Oxford historian, took issue with this when he argued that

“at any given moment of history there are real alternatives, and to dismiss them as unreal because they were not realised is to take the reality out of the situation. How can we ‘*explain* what happened and *why*’ if we only look at what happened and never consider the alternatives, the total pattern of forces whose pressure created the event? [...]

History is not merely what happened: it is what happened in the context of what might have happened. Therefore it must incorporate, as a necessary element, the alternatives, the might-have-beens..”¹

There is a huge literature on the Hungarian Revolution, and as a result of the regime-change in those countries that were involved in its events, a substantial part of the confidential files relating to it have now become accessible to researchers. Since 1990, through document collections, memoirs and detailed scholarly monographs, it is now possible to know just about everything about the background to the events, the thinking of its participants, and what lay behind its major turning-points. Thus, one can only welcome the fact that the young Budapest journalist of 1956 who, under the name of Charles Gati, became an acclaimed historian and political scientist in the United States, has drawn on the findings of both the previous and more recent scholarly works, has painstakingly searched through archives in Hungary, Russia and the USA, has interviewed participants and eye-witnesses who were accessible to him, has decided to publish a concise, readable synthesis that will dispel any illusions we might have about 1956.² His book by no means eschews emotion in rigorously meeting the demands of objectivity. At the launch of the Hungarian edition, János M. Rainer, one of the pre-eminent experts on 1956, described it as a lively and provocative essay which constitutes the first serious revision among the accounts of Revolution that have

¹ H. Trevor-Roper: *History and Imagination*. Oxford, 1980.

² Hungarian Edition: Charles Gati: *Vesztett illúziók. Moszkva, Washington, Budapest és az 1956-os forradalom*. Budapest, Osiris, 2006. 268 pp..

appeared to date. Gati's key and truly earthshaking thesis; if Imre Nagy had been a more suitable leader during the days of the Revolution, and if the revolutionaries had been capable of moderating their demands, and if America, instead of mere rhetoric, had shown a more vigorous and firmer response to events, then there would have been a realistic chance of the USSR holding back on its intervention. Had that been the case Hungary would have acquired a more moderate Communist regime, somewhere between the administrations of a Gomulka and a Tito.

Superbly edited, with more than half an eye to teaching purposes, the book outlines its main contentions in the first chapter before proceeding to present the political career of Imre Nagy as a revolutionary *malgré lui*.³ Gati confirms that Nagy, demonstrably a faithful Communist during the full quarter of a century that he lived in the USSR, though understandably cowed during the Stalinist purges of the Thirties, was indeed an informer for the secret police (though the allegation that he was actively involved in the execution of the tsarist family is groundless), and this was the source of his high-ranking contacts. Mátyás Rákosi and the other members of the 'foursome' (Erno Gero, Mihály Farkas and József Révai) looked down on and despised him (though Gati does not say so, this was presumably on account of his peasant roots) and every now and then managed to relegate him to the background; after Stalin's death his non-Jewish origins made the Kremlin see him as an ideal choice as Hungary's prime minister. Gati is good at picking out how internal feuding within the parties in both Moscow and Budapest governed the ups and downs of Nagy's fortunes, and how the once reliable Muscovite had, by 1955, steeled himself and become deservedly popular in his own country.

By supporting and then dropping Nagy, the Soviet leaders awakened Hungary's intellectual elite and united it against Stalinism, paving the way for a furious challenge to the Soviet empire. By stifling within system reform, the Kremlin made revolution all but inevitable; by removing Nagy from power, the Kremlin made him the coming revolt's only conceivable, if altogether unlikely, inadvertent, and—sad to say—ill-equipped leader.

Gati provides a good summary of the details that have come to light in recent years concerning the line taken by the Kremlin after 1953; in the light of these, it becomes easier to understand the changes of tack shown by the Communist leadership in Budapest. For a Western or young Hungarian reader it will seem almost incredible how, even after the death of Stalin, the choice of who should be leader in a Soviet satellite state such as Hungary should be largely

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determined by internal feuding and shifting tactical alliances in the Kremlin. The people who put Nagy in charge in June 1953 were the same as those who attacked him on 8 January 1955 for his “petty bourgeois” and “anti-Party” conduct. Keen as ever to outdo Moscow’s bidding, Rákosi’s faction went so far as to expel Nagy from the Hungarian Party, but in so doing they set him up as a figurehead for the growing number of disillusioned Communists. Before long the Moscow “line” altered again, and advocates of a political thaw gained the upper hand (the Geneva summit; the ending of military occupation of Austria and its re-establishment as a sovereign state; rapprochement with Tito - all testify that); this led to Rákosi’s dismissal, but the ensuing duumvirate of Gerő and András Hegedüs (the latter as the newly appointed prime minister) was totally incapable of bringing bring calm to a tense situation. Indeed they were the immediate trigger of the revolt that touched off the armed uprising. If there is anybody left who still needs to be convinced, the book demonstrates that it was disenchanted Marxists and Communists, the participants in the Petőfi Circle, who prompted the broad climate of opinion in favour of change. Given that it was taking place within the framework of a totalitarian dictatorship, the initiative could not have come in any other way except from inside, from within the orbit of the Party’s intellectuals. In that connection, it is important to say, as it is usually not said candidly (indeed, a subject of heated dispute even today) is how Hungary’s Jews comported themselves between 1945 and 1956. I personally share Gati’s view when he writes: “If they are to be blamed for bringing communism in [and one may add that this was not up to them in any case], they should surely receive credit for bringing it down.” And the rider that he adds is legitimate: most “average” Hungarian Jews, like other Hungarians, were wary, afraid and largely passive throughout this era; “average Jews” contributed little either to the rise or the demise of communism.

Many new details can be distilled from recent research findings found in two chapters about the events in Washington, Moscow and Budapest that led up to the Revolution. The author provides a succinct, fifty-odd page history of the “thirteen days that shook the Kremlin” (to borrow the title of Tibor Méray’s book), though it has to be said that this takes no account of events outside the capital. It is not new, but the general public may not be aware of the process that led Imre Nagy, who in the days immediately after 23 October was still “a prisoner...of his own Communist past” (p. 150) and who spoke of a counter-revolution (though he was

opposed to the intervention of Soviet troops), to declare a week later, on 30 October, the restoration of multi-party democracy. His close supporters and subsequent fellow martyrs had a big part in this, and the thumbnail sketches of these figures that the book offers are one of its major strengths. Even more important is what Gati relates about the number of insurgents, their background and their thinking, based on the most recent publications (especially by László Eörsi and László Gyurkó). Their strength (around fifteen thousand armed combatants) does not seem much; however, in effect they had the whole country behind them. Within a couple of days the state and party apparatus throughout the country collapsed without offering any resistance, so on that point I cannot agree with Gati's comments about people being on both sides of the barricade. There were no two sides, as it was a tiny minority of party functionaries and the ÁVÓ security police, totalling no more than a few thousand or at most tens of thousands, who—primarily on account of past deeds and crimes that they had committed—were ranged against the whole country, the entire Hungarian nation (including those cut off by frontiers). That was the voice of the people as relayed to parliament by their delegations, and it is likely to have played at least as big a part in persuading Nagy to make his about face at the end of October as his friends and immediate associates, such as the persuasive of Miklós Gimes, József Szilágyi, Tamás Aczél, Ferenc Donáth, Géza Losonczy, Miklós Vásárhelyi and Szilárd Újhelyi. In a radio address that he made on 28 October he identified himself with the aims of the “broad, democratic mass movement”, proclaimed a cease-fire and announced that agreement had been reached with the Soviet government on a withdrawal of Soviet military units from Budapest. On 30 October he announced the end of the one-party system and the formation of a cabinet based on the coalition parties of 1945. It seemed that a miracle had occurred: the Revolution in Hungary was victorious. That was the belief of the whole country, including the writer of these lines, then a 15-year-old schoolboy who, starting with the protest march to the statue of General Bem that kicked off the Revolution, had a chance to visit all its main sites; who looked down the barrel of a Russian machine gun that was levelled at him; who stepped with a shudder over the lime-covered corpses of dead Russian soldiers; but whose most indelible memory is of the sheer joy and happiness that could be seen on everybody's face after those announcements were made at the end of October. The joy was legitimate given two of the most prominent Soviet leaders, Mikoyan and Suslov, in negotiations with Nagy and Zoltán Tildy, the former Smallholder Party leader, had agreed to all of the sixteen points demanded by the revolutionaries on 23

October; moreover, a communiqué issued by the Soviet government on 30 October promised to place relations with “the other socialist states” on completely new footing of equality and state sovereignty. The sensational statement also included an acknowledgement that the Soviet Union was prepared to discuss the matter of its military presence in Hungary.

We already knew that one day later, during the night dawning on 31 October, the Soviet leadership, with Khrushchev to the fore, changed its mind and decided to occupy Hungary and install a puppet government. That decision was unquestionably swayed by the Suez Crisis that blew up on 29 October with the military action taken by Great Britain, France and Israel against Egypt, but the decisive factor must have been a fear that the collapse of the Communist regime in Hungary, quite apart from the enormous loss of face that it would entail, might set off a chain reaction of protests against the equally loathed Communist governments in other satellite states. The Hungarian government was already informed by the following day that new Soviet army units were crossing the country’s frontier. Nagy had no illusions: the disappearance of Kádár and Münnich, two less compromised prominent Communists, could only be taken as a bad omen. His declaration of Hungarian neutrality later that day and then, after the sighting of the military ring around Budapest and the last straw of Soviet ambassador Andropov’s lies, the announcement on 3 November of the country’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact were last-ditch attempts to avert the threat of attack. The fact that Khrushchev received unanimous backing in a series of lightning visits that he paid on the Polish comrades at Brest, on the Romanians, Czechs and Bulgarians in Bucharest, and on Tito on the island of Brioni—indeed, was urged by them to intervene militarily against Hungary—has been known for some time. Gati also cites as a final crucial factor the continued in-fighting for power within the Soviet leadership, and the opportunity offered to Khrushchev to counter any accusations of being too soft. He also suggests that if the insurgents in Budapest had not entertained “illusions about their courageous insurgency forcing the Soviet Union to retreat”; if Hungary had not rejected the one-party system; and if Imre Nagy had been more in charge of the situation and been able to check outrages such as the siege on the Party headquarters in Republic Square and the ensuing lynchings, then perhaps the Soviet Union would not have launched its aggression on 4 November and “the revolt might well have succeeded” (p. 220).

The author concludes that there were other factors in Moscow and Budapest that might have helped events to take another, more favourable course. Painfully

absorbing though this supposition is, I have to agree with others in seeing this as unhistorical. Gati is quite right that those who took up arms were not only young; they were also—as in all modern revolutions—mostly uneducated and mostly unskilled workers. (p. 157). It would indeed have been hard for any well-informed, educated person to believe that the valiant young boys (and girls) of Budapest, with their primitive weapons, entirely worthy of admiration as they were, would have any realistic chance of success against the Soviet superpower. It is easy to understand how, under the influence of early successes against a Soviet army that viewed them as a counter-revolutionary rabble and was unprepared for guerrilla combat in a big city, the political demands of the insurgents became radicalised, and they no longer sought merely to ameliorate the system but to transform it. In this regard they concurred with the supporters of the parties that had operated in Hungary between 1945 and 1947 before being banned and persecuted, but that had been resurrected during the previous week. In many cases these people had been released from prison or internment during Imre Nagy’s first term as premier and now exercised their newly won freedom to reject not only communism but socialism in all its varieties. Nobody, however, wished to see a return the Horthy era. If one wants to put a label on the goals of the masses, “the man in the street”, then social democracy and Christian democracy would be the two poles around which the core tenets of the mushrooming number of political parties could be characterised. The Revolution swept the Communist regime aside, and all Nagy did up until 30 October was acknowledge and legitimise that fact. The idea that Nagy and the whole revolution might have been able to limit itself, that there was no necessity for it to run to demands for multiparty democracy and complete independence from the Soviet Union—it is simply unrealistic. Even if he had been more forceful and resolute, Nagy would have been unable to contain public sentiment. Even supposing that he did succeed in braking the momentum and halting the historical process, it is highly unlikely that this would have mollified Moscow. After all, it was precisely through drawing the lessons of 1956 that the Czechs in 1968 were in the position that Gati posits of Hungary 1956: a programme of democratic socialism with a human face that did not defy Moscow—but to no avail. When the Solidarity movement in Poland carried through a “self-limiting revolution” in 1980-81 by only battling for the social demands of employees, leaving the political élite in place and not even trying to break free from the “geopolitical” cage, a Soviet leadership that was a good deal more enlightened than it had been in 1956 was unwilling to allow even that. Given these subsequent examples, I would hazard a guess that insofar as Imre Nagy

Comment [x2]: this is the traditional term in English

would have wanted a “Big Compromise” amounting to a milder form of Communism like that advocated by Gomulka and, later on, by Khrushchev himself, that truly would have spared a few hundred lives, but the one-party system and the ultimately ruinous economic policy would have been left intact, and it is far from certain that the Communist dominoes would have fallen as they did 33 years later.

For an alternative that was not realised in 1956 but stood a realistic chance one has to look not to Budapest or Moscow but to Washington. In a volume that was published to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution, the distinguished British historian Hugh Seton-Watson (son of R.W. Seton-Watson, the Scotus Viator who was so critical of the Hungarians before and after the First World War) expressed his doubts:

“Contributors to this book rightly emphasize that there was no contingency planning on the Western, especially American, side for revolution in an East Central European state and that the diplomatic representatives of the Western allies has virtually no contact with the Nagy government. We must ask ourselves the question: Could nothing have been done? I have spent many hours in the last twenty years discussing this with British and American diplomats, journalists and even a few politicians; and all have insisted that nothing could have been done. And yet I confess that I am not convinced. Of course, American military invasion of Hungary was not possible, still less a nuclear ultimatum to Moscow. Of course, formal diplomatic notes could achieve nothing. But was it really impossible for the United States government, using all the private and public channels of communication available to it and all the means of pressure at its disposal, to have convinced the Soviet government that the consequences of invasion would have been very much more unpleasant for it than the consequences of letting the Nagy government, *which was in control of Hungary*, stay in power until a settlement, acceptable to all parties concerned, including the Great Powers, could be worked out? The truth is that the United States government did not even try. Dulles revealed himself an empty demagogue. Nobody tried

because everyone was obsessed with the presidential election and the Suez Canal.”⁴

Gati himself does not argue that the failure of the Revolution can be put down entirely to illusions on the Hungarian side. His analyses of Washington’s policy makes for the most valuable part of his book, and I have to confess that his conclusions have led me to modify my own earlier understanding.⁵ Like most contemporaries and later commentators, I too was of the opinion that the United States could not be accused of abandoning the Hungarian Revolution, because military intervention on its part could easily have led to world war or a nuclear catastrophe. Where I found fault with the Western powers was over their failure, once the Hungarian revolt had broken out, to delay their long-planned invasion of Egypt, which completely overshadowed Hungary’s business. Above all, I found America’s behaviour at the United Nations, which then had far greater prestige and power than it does today, hard to excuse.

Contrary to general belief (which the younger President Bush appears to share), America and the Soviet Union did not divide Europe up at the Yalta conference in 1945. America would only have been able to halt the sovietisation of East-Central Europe that was completed in 1948 by using atomic weapons, or at least by threatening with that, which the American public would never have accepted. But the Truman administration did guarantee Western Europe’s security with its policy of containment and the creation of the NATO alliance. Even after Eisenhower’s win in the 1952 presidential election the Republican Party, with its much tougher anti-Communist rhetoric and talk of “liberation”, was unwilling to commit the United States to war against the USSR and its allies. It failed even to envisage the possibility that a spontaneous revolt might break out in a Communist country. Gati’s researches in the archives also support Bennet Kovrig’s earlier claim⁶ that any talk of “liberation” was nothing more than empty propaganda sloganising, and the U.S. government had no specific plans of that kind. The American intelligence services were as good as powerless against Hungary’s totalitarian police state,

⁴ Hugh Seton-Watson: Introduction In: Béla K. Király and Paul Jónás (eds.), *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in Retrospect*. Boulder, Colo., 1978, p. 5-6.

⁵ Géza Jeszenszky: “Cserbenhagyott-e a Nyugat bennünket 1956-ban? [Did the West leave us in the lurch in 1956” *Magyar Nemzet*, 16th November 1995, p. 10 ; “Did the United States Let Hungary Down in 1956?,” in: Eniko_Bollobás and Szilvia Nagy (eds): *The 1950s. Proceedings of the 2003 Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies*. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, 2005, pp. **39-44**.

⁶ Bennet Kovrig: *The Myth of Liberation. East-Central Europe in U.S. Diplomacy and Politics since 1941*. Baltimore, 1973; *idem: Of Walls and Bridges. The United States and Eastern Europe*. New York & London: New York University Press, 1991.

which goes some way to explaining why the reforms that were brought in by Imre Nagy in 1953 were accorded no significance. Gati presents a balanced view of Radio Free Europe (RFE), set up in 1951, and the impact it had on Hungary, bearing out Gyula Borbándi's findings.⁷ It fulfilled the important function of providing trustworthy information both about the Soviet bloc and the free world, and it kept alive the hope that the "captive nations" would one day regain their independence. Not even the station's Hungarian staff were to know that the American government, which the listeners identified with them, was not at all ready to accomplish the professed goal of overthrowing communism. "Inflated rhetoric" with "no underpinnings in policy" (p. 111)—those are the harsh epithets that Gati applies to the Eisenhower administration's policy in Eastern Europe, and it is no justification, indeed it only makes things worse, that they themselves believed their anti-Communist rhetoric would bring the hoped-for and promised result.

Comment [x3]: that is the traditional, official term

Thanks to the US Freedom of Information act, Gati has had a chance to study official files that are otherwise, even today, classified as confidential. These confirm that America, far from having done anything to prepare the way for the Hungarian Revolution, was in fact caught totally unprepared. Gati discerns three major defects in the policy that the United States pursued during the Fifties in relation to Hungary. Firstly, while it flirted with support for an extension of Titoism to Central and Eastern Europe, this was found not to be politically attractive enough and so was discarded. The result of this was that the Hungarian section in RFE, in accordance with instructions from the State Department and the CIA, continually gave vocal support to radical demands. Second, America failed to appreciate Imre Nagy's importance and indeed still set no store on him⁸ even after the turning-point at the end of October. And the gravest fault of all was the failure of America's leaders, while the Revolution was in progress, to turn to the Kremlin with any meaningful proposal that was worthy of consideration. Eisenhower was concerned that the Soviet Union would respond aggressively if it perceived that the tacitly accepted post-1947 division of Europe was under threat; after 23 October his main goal was to reassure the Soviet leadership that the United States was not going to endanger Soviet interests in Eastern Europe and was not seeking to overthrow the Communist regimes there. On October 27th,

⁷ Gyula Borbándi: *Magyarok az Angol Kertben. A Szabad Európa Rádió története* [Hungarians in the *Englischer Garten*: the history of Radio Free Europe]. Budapest: Európa, 1996.

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having cleared it first with the president, Secretary of State Dulles delivered an important speech in Dallas, Texas. He offered economic aid to the captive nations that followed independent policies, but he did not suggest that they needed to change their social system as a precondition for such assistance: “The United States has no ulterior motive in desiring the independence of the satellite countries... We do not look upon these nations as potential military allies.”⁹

Had the Soviet Union been well-intentioned and anxious for peace and co-operation, the speech might have provided a good argument for not intervening militarily; however, what Moscow’s hard-liners read into it was that it was offering a *carte blanche* to go ahead as they would not have to reckon with an American intervention. Meanwhile the RFE’s Hungarian staff in Munich were unaware that the confrontational stance that they had been broadcasting with the blessing of their paymasters now had no political backing and that America had not the faintest idea how the promised liberation was to be achieved. Left to their own devices, guided by their own emotions, the Hungarian editors enthusiastically watched the downfall of communism in Hungary.

Gati does not mention, however, that the US National Security Council’s directive NSC 174 stated that its goal was to destabilise the Soviet empire, but not to foment revolt and not to commit the American government to providing aid. It seems that this was never brought to the attention of either RFE or its listeners. Gati might also have mentioned that the Democratic Party opposition demonstrated more sensitivity to Hungarian expectations. Adlai Stevenson, who was then running as the Democrats’ presidential candidate, urged the United Nations to step in on the side of the Hungarian Revolution. A leading article in the *New York Times* for October 27th suggested that there could not be a more clear-cut case for foreign intervention under the aegis of the UN. Obviously this had everything to do with electioneering, though it should be said that the Democratic Party had long had a strong tradition of conducting a principled foreign policy.

It is true that the Suez conflict did divert attention away from Hungary, and it certainly undermined the solidarity of the Western powers, but that was not the real reason for their passivity towards Hungary. There were experts within the National Security Council and the CIA (Frank Wisner for one) who considered, and even went so far as to recommend, that military aid be given, but the logistic

⁹ Quoted by Kovrig, *The Myth...*, p. 182.

difficulties of doing so, Austria's neutrality, and the line adopted by Hungary's other neighbours all provided convenient excuses for doing nothing.

Gati does not deal at any length with events at the UN, though America's record there was no better. No response of any kind was given to the Hungarian declaration of neutrality. It was in vain that the so-called "Cassandra Club", an informal grouping of emigrants, a number of conscientious UN officials and official delegates, recommended that the emergency session of the General Assembly called for November 1st to debate the Suez question should also deal with Hungary's declaration of neutrality and the incoming news of Soviet troop movements, Dulles simply referred the matter for consideration by the Security Council. There Arkady Sobolev, the Soviet delegate, claimed that raising the Hungarian question was just a tactic to divert attention from the Suez crisis. He denied the reports of Soviet troop movements and asserted that talks were in progress between the Hungarian government and the Soviet military authorities on the evacuation of troops. The emergency session of the UN General Assembly on the Suez affair continued on the evening of November 3rd. News of the Soviet attack on Budapest and Nagy's dramatic appeal for help came in to New York shortly before midnight. Dr Ronald Walker, the Australian delegate who was chairing the session, moved for an adjournment of the debate and at 3 o'clock in the morning local time the Security Council began an extraordinary session. This was about the same time that minister of state István Bibó, who had been left alone in the Hungarian parliament, was typing a statement on behalf of the Hungarian government:

Now it is for the world powers to demonstrate the force of the principles laid down by the United Nations charter and the strength of the freedom-loving peoples of the world.

It was almost in answer to this that Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. delegate to the United Nations, stated: "If ever there was a time when the action of the United Nations could literally be a matter of life and death for a whole nation, this is the time." Then he addressed some words to the Hungarian nation: "**By your heroic sacrifice you have given the United Nations a brief moment in which to mobilise the conscience of the world on your behalf. We are seizing that moment, and we will not fail you.**"¹⁰ In order to circumvent the Soviet veto, the emergency session of the General Assembly, following the precedent established

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

over Korea in 1950, reconvened on 5 November and passed a U.S. motion that Soviet troops be withdrawn and a commission be sent. This, however, did not alter the brute facts: Hungary's fate—to adapt one of Bismarck's classic sayings—would not be decided by votes and majority decisions but by blood and iron.

Hungary's tragedy, the continued resistance, and the ensuing flood of refugees may not have moved the Kremlin but certainly touched world public opinion. Many people volunteered to help in the liberation of the country. Hungary's "finest hour" redounded to the glory of the nation. Gati's book, which has been simultaneously published in five languages—in Polish, Russian and Slovak as well as English and Hungarian—is more than just a work of scholarship but, as for many of his contemporaries, also a matter of processing a life-defining experience. Beyond the commemorations, this a work that is going to make a major contribution to stimulating a rethink, both in Hungary and abroad, not merely about the significance and outcome of the 1956 Revolution but also any lessons that can be learned from it. However justified it may be, condemnation of the Western democracies over 1956 is pointless, except for a political message that is topical right now. In 1956 the governments of the day judged short-term interests to be more important than riskier policies with a broader perspective. America did not attempt to roll back the Soviet regime because it overestimated the Soviet Union's strength and underestimated the geostrategic importance of Central and Eastern Europe. Gati's arguments, in many respects convincing, were preceded almost forty years ago by Robert Murphy, the highly experienced diplomat who was Foster Dulles' Under-Secretary in 1956:

"Perhaps history will demonstrate that the free world could have intervened to give Hungarians the liberty they sought, but none of us in the State Department had the skill or the imagination to devise a way."¹¹

Solving political crises calls for both expertise and imagination.

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¹¹ Robert Murphy: *Diplomat Among Warriors*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday., 1964, p. 432.

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Two chapters contain many new details uncovered by recent research about the events in Washington, Moscow and Budapest that led up to the Revolution. The author provides a succinct, fifty-odd page history of the "thirteen days that shook the Kremlin" (to borrow the title of Tibor Méray's book), though it has to be said that this takes no account of events outside the capital. It is not new, but the general public may not be aware of the process that led Imre Nagy, who in the days immediately after 23 October was still "a prisoner... of his own Communist past" (p. 150) and who spoke of a counter-revolution (though he was opposed to the intervention of Soviet troops), to declare a week later, on 30 October, the restoration of multi-party democracy. His close supporters (and subsequent fellow martyrs) had a big part in this, and the thumbnail sketches of these figures that the book offers are one of its major strengths. Even more important is what Gati relates about the number of insurgents, their background and their thinking, based on the most recent publications (especially by László Eörsi and László Gyurkó). Their numbers (around fifteen thousand armed combatants) was not substantial; however, in effect they had the whole country behind them. Within a couple of days the state and party apparatus throughout the country collapsed without offering any resistance, so on that point I cannot agree with Gati's comments about people being found on both sides of the

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For an alternative that was not realised in 1956 but stood a realistic chance, one has to look not to Budapest or Moscow but to Washington. In a volume that was published to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Revolution, the distinguished British historian Hugh Seton-Watson, son of R.W. Seton-Watson (Scotus Viator), who was so critical of the Hungarians before and after the First World War, expressed his doubts:

Contributors to this book rightly emphasize that there was no contingency planning on

barricades. As regards public sentiment, there were no two sides. It was a tiny minority of party functionaries and the ÁVÓ security police, no more than a few thousand, at most tens of thousands, who—primarily on account of their past and the crimes that they had committed—were ranged against the whole country, the entire Hungarian nation (including those cut off by frontiers). It was the voice of the people that was relayed to parliament by their delegations, and their appeal was likely to have played at least as big a part in persuading Nagy to make his about face at the end of October as the arguments of his immediate associates, such as Miklós Gimes, József Szilágyi, Tamás Aczél, Ferenc Donáth, Géza Losonczy, Miklós Vásárhelyi and Szilárd Újhelyi. In a radio address on 28 October, Nagy identified himself with the aims of the "broad, democratic mass movement", proclaimed a ceasefire and announced that agreement had been reached with the Soviet government on a withdrawal of Soviet military units from Budapest. On 30 October he announced the end of the one-party system and the formation of a cabinet based on the coalition parties of 1945. It seemed that a miracle had occurred and that the Revolution in Hungary was victorious. Or so the whole country believed, including the writer of these lines, then a 15-year-old schoolboy who, after joining the protest march to the statue of General Bem that kicked off the uprising, turned up at all the main locations; who looked down the barrel of a Russian machine

the Western, especially American, side for revolution in an East Central European state and that the diplomatic representatives of the Western allies has virtually no contact with the Nagy government. We must ask ourselves the question: Could nothing have been done? I have spent many hours in the last twenty years discussing this with British and American diplomats, journalists and even a few politicians; and all have insisted that nothing could have been done. And yet I confess that I am not convinced. Of course, American military invasion of Hungary was not possible, still less a nuclear ultimatum to Moscow. Of course, formal diplomatic notes could achieve nothing. But was it really impossible for the United States government, using all the private and public channels of communication available to it and all the means of pressure at its disposal, to have convinced the Soviet government that the consequences of invasion would have been very much more unpleasant for it than the consequences of letting the Nagy government, which was in control of Hungary, stay in power until a settlement, acceptable to all parties concerned, including the Great Powers, could be worked out? The truth is that the United States government did not even try. Dulles revealed himself an empty demagogue. Nobody tried because everyone was obsessed with the presidential election and the Suez Canal.¹

gun that was levelled at him; who stepped with a shudder over the limecovered corpses of dead Russian soldiers; but whose most indelible memory is of the sheer joy and happiness that could be seen on everybody's face after those announcements at the end of October. The joy was legitimate: two of the most prominent Soviet leaders, Mikoyan and Suslov, in negotiations with Nagy and Zoltán Tildy, the former Smallholder Party leader, had agreed to all of the sixteen points demanded by the revolutionaries on 23 October; in addition, a communiqué issued by the Soviet government on 30 October promised to place relations with "the other socialist states" on a completely new footing of equality and state sovereignty. The sensational statement also included an acknowledgement that the Soviet Union was prepared to discuss the matter of its military presence in Hungary.

It has been known for some time that one day later, on the night before 31 October, the Soviet leadership, with Khrushchev at the fore, changed its mind and decided to occupy Hungary and install a puppet government. That decision was unquestionably influenced by the Suez Crisis that blew up on 29 October as the armies of Great Britain, France and Israel moved against Egypt, but the decisive factor must have been a fear that the collapse of the Communist regime in Hungary, quite apart from the enormous loss of face that it would entail, might set off a chain reaction of protests against the equally loathed

Gati, too, claims that Hungarian illusions are not solely responsible for the failure of the Revolution. His analyses of Washington's policy makes for the most valuable part of his book, and I have to admit that his conclusions have led me to modify my own earlier understanding.² Like most contemporaries and later commentators, I too was of the opinion that the United States could not be accused of abandoning Hungary, because military intervention on its part could easily have led to a world war or a nuclear catastrophe. Where I found fault with the Western powers was over their failure, once the Hungarian revolt had broken out, to delay their long-planned invasion of Egypt, which completely overshadowed Hungary's plight. Above all, I found America's behaviour at the United Nations, which at the time enjoyed far greater prestige and power than it does today, hard to excuse.

Contrary to general belief (which the younger Bush appears to share), America and the Soviet Union did not divide Europe up at the Yalta conference in 1945. America would only have been able to halt the Sovietization of East-Central Europe that was completed in 1948 by using or at least threatening to use nuclear weapons, which the American public would never have accepted. But the Truman administration did guarantee Western Europe's security with its policy of containment and the creation of NATO. Even after Eisenhower's victory in the 1952 presidential election, the Republican Party, with its much tougher anti-

Communist governments in other satellite states. The Hungarian government was informed by the following day that fresh Soviet units were crossing the country's frontiers. Nagy had no illusions: the disappearance of Kádár and Münnich, two less compromised prominent Communists, could only be taken as a bad omen. His declaration of Hungarian neutrality later that day and then, after the news of the military encirclement of Budapest and Soviet ambassador Andropov's lies, the announcement on 3 November of the country's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact were two last desperate attempts to avert the threat of attack. The fact that Khrushchev received unanimous backing in a series of lightning visits that he paid on the Polish comrades at Brest, on the Romanians, Czechs and Bulgarians in Bucharest, and on Tito on the island of Brioni—indeed, he was urged by them to intervene militarily against Hungary—has also been known for some time. Gati cites as a final crucial factor the continued infighting for power within the Soviet leadership, and the opportunity offered to Khrushchev to counter any accusations of being too soft. He also suggests that if the insurgents in Budapest had not entertained "illusions about their courageous insurgency forcing the Soviet Union to retreat", if Hungary had not rejected the one-party system, and if Imre Nagy had been more in charge of the situation and been able to check outrages such as the siege of the Party headquarters in Republic (Köztársaság) Square

Communist rhetoric and talk of "liberation", was unwilling to commit the United States to war against the Soviet Union and its allies. It failed even to envisage the possibility that a spontaneous revolt might break out in a Communist country. Gati's researches in the archives also support Bennet Kovrig's earlier claim³ that any talk of "liberation" was no more than empty propaganda sloganising, that the U.S. government had no concrete plans of that kind. The American intelligence services were as good as powerless against Hungary's totalitarian police state, which goes some way to explaining why the reforms that were brought in by Imre Nagy in 1953 were accorded no significance. Gati presents a balanced view of Radio Free Europe (RFE), set up in 1951, and the impact it had on Hungary, bearing out Gyula Borbándi's findings.⁴ RFE fulfilled the important function of providing trustworthy information both about the Soviet bloc and the free world, and it kept alive the hope that the "captive nations" would one day regain their independence. The station's Hungarian staff did not know, and thus listeners could not suspect, that the American government was not in the least ready to carry out the professed objective of overthrowing communism. "Inflated rhetoric" with "no underpinnings in policy" (p. 111) are the harsh epithets that Gati applies to the Eisenhower administration's policy in Eastern Europe; it is no justification, indeed it only makes things worse, that they themselves believed their anti-Communist rhetoric would

and the ensuing lynchings; then perhaps the Soviet Union would not have started its aggression on 4 November and "the revolt might well have succeeded" (p. 220). The author claims that there were other factors, too, in Moscow and Budapest that might have helped events to take another, more favourable course.

Painfully interesting though this hypothesis is, I am not the only one to consider it unhistorical. Gati is quite right that those who took up arms were not only young; they were also-as in all modern revolutions- mostly uneducated and unskilled workers (p. 157). It would indeed have been hard for any well-informed, educated person to believe what the brave young boys (and girls) of Budapest, with their primitive weapons, believed. Entirely worthy of admiration as they were, they did not have any realistic chance against the Soviet superpower. It is easy to understand how, under the influence of early successes against a Soviet army that viewed them as a counter-revolutionary rabble and was unprepared for guerrilla fighting in a city, the political demands of the insurgents became so radicalised that they no longer sought merely to ameliorate the system but to transform it. In this regard they concurred with the supporters of parties that had operated in Hungary's short-lived multiparty democracy (1945 and 1947) before they were banned and persecuted, and which had been resurrected in a matter of days. In many cases, these people had been released from prison or internment during

produce the hoped-for and promised result. Thanks to the US Freedom of Information Act, Gati had a chance to study official files that are still classified as confidential. These confirm that America, far from having done anything to prepare the way for the Hungarian Revolution, was in fact caught totally unprepared. Gati discerns three major defects in United States Hungarian policy in the Fifties. Firstly, while it flirted with support for an extension of Titoism to Central and Eastern Europe, this was found not to be politically attractive enough and so was discarded. The result of this was that RFE's Hungarian section, in accordance with instructions from the State Department and the CIA, continually voiced support for radical demands. Second, America failed to appreciate Imre Nagy's importance and, indeed, still set no store by him even after the turning point at the end of October. The gravest fault of all was the failure of American leaders, while the Revolution was in progress, to turn to the Kremlin with any meaningful proposal that was worthy of consideration. Eisenhower was worried that the Soviet Union would respond aggressively if it perceived that the tacitly accepted post-1947 division of Europe was under threat. After 23 October his main goal was to reassure the Soviet leadership that the United States was not going to endanger Soviet interests in Eastern Europe and was not seeking to overthrow the Communist regimes there. On October 27th, having first cleared it with the President, Secretary of State Dulles

Imre Nagy's first term as premier; they now exercised their newly won freedom to reject not only communism but socialism in all its varieties. Nobody, however, wished to see a return of the Horthy regime. If one wants to put a label on the goals of the masses, then social democracy and Christian democracy would be the two poles around which the mushrooming number of political parties defined themselves. The Revolution swept the Communist regime aside, and all Nagy did up until 30 October was to acknowledge and legitimise that fact. The idea that Nagy and the whole Revolution might have been able to limit itself, that there was no necessity for it to run to demands for multi-party democracy and complete independence from the Soviet Union is simply unrealistic. Even if he had been more forceful and resolute, Nagy would have been unable to contain public feeling. Even supposing that he had succeeded in putting on the brakes, it is highly unlikely that this would have mollified Moscow. After all, it was precisely the lessons of 1956 that stopped the Czechs in 1968 where, according to Gati, the Hungarians should have stopped in 1956: a programme of democratic socialism with a human face that did not defy Moscow-but to no avail.

delivered an important speech in Dallas, Texas. He offered economic aid to the captive nations that followed independent policies, but he did not suggest that they needed to change their social system as a condition for such assistance: "The United States has no ulterior motive in desiring the independence of the satellite countries. We do not look upon these nations as potential military allies."⁵ Had the Soviet Union been well-intentioned and anxious for peace and cooperation, the speech might have provided a good argument for not intervening militarily; however, what Moscow's hardliners read into it was a carte blanche offer to go ahead, as they would not have to reckon with an American intervention. Meanwhile the RFE's Hungarian staff in Munich went on with their confrontational propaganda with the blessing of their superiors, unaware that there was no political backing behind it and that America never had the faintest idea how the promised liberation was to be achieved. Left to their own devices, guided by their own feelings, it is no wonder that the station's Hungarian editors enthusiastically welcomed what they thought was the downfall of communism at home in Hungary.

¹ ■ Hugh Seton-Watson: Introduction. In: Béla K. Király and Paul Jónás (eds.), *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in Retrospect*. Boulder, Colorado, 1978, pp. 5-6.

² ■ Géza Jeszenszky: "Cserbenhagyott-e a Nyugat bennünket 1956-ban? [Did the West Leave us in the Lurch in 1956?], *Magyar Nemzet*, 16th November 1995, p. 10 ; "Did the United States Let Hungary Down in 1956?", in: Enikő Bollobás and Szilvia Nagy (eds): *The 1950s. Proceedings of*

Jeszenszky: *Was Defeat of 1956 Avoidable?*

the 2003 Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, 2005, pp. 39-44.

³ ■ Bennet Kovrig: *The Myth of Liberation. East-Central Europe in U.S. Diplomacy and Politics since 1941*. Baltimore, 1973; idem: *Of Walls and Bridges. The United States and Eastern Europe*. New York & London: New York University Press, 1991.

⁴ ■ Gyula Borbándi: *Magyarok az Angol Kertben. A Szabad Európa Rádió története* (Hungarians in the Englischer Garten: The history of Radio Free Europe). Budapest: Európa, 1996.

⁵ ■ Quoted by Kovrig, *The Myth.*, p. 182.

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