



# HUNGARIAN STUDIES

2006

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*Volume 20*  
*Number 2*

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# HUNGARIAN STUDIES

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## INTERSECTING LIVES – IMRE NAGY AND JÁNOS KÁDÁR IN 1956

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The aim of this paper is not to provide a biographical sketch of the two politicians. There is no doubt that the two persons shaped, in one way or another, the history of Hungary in the second half of the short twentieth century. Though they had worked together in the leadership of the Hungarian Communist Party from late 1944 until the early 1950s (when Kádár was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment during the purges), though Kádár had been released during Nagy's first period of office as Prime Minister, and though they were both focal points of opposition (if very different ones) during the thaw, during the spring of 1956 – their personal and political encounter occurred during the '56 Revolution. This encounter was an attempt to harmonize two different sets of political values – radical and moderate anti-Stalinism, a reform communism of principle and one of praxis. Finally, their divergent perspectives elicited a conflict in which Nagy was defeated, while Kádár's practical approach prevailed only after a short period of re-Stalinization. What follows deals first with the previous history of how the two systems of political values developed. Then comes an account of the moment when their lives crossed, their point of intersection in 1956.

**Keywords:** János Kádár, Imre Nagy, Hungarian Revolution of 1956, “Blum Theses”, László Rajk, Mátyás Rákosi, anti-Stalinism, show-trial

Nagy and Kádár had some similarities of social and cultural background: both came from the lower strata of society. Politically, Nagy represented the first generation of Hungarian communists, who had joined the movement just after the Bolshevik Revolution. Of the three main fields and schools of Hungarian communism, Nagy attended all: the Social Democracy, the underground movement, and the Soviet Union – the last being the longest (1930–44). Kádár had very little Social Democrat experience, and he did not go to Moscow until the late 1940s. As a communist, he was brought up in the illegal party of the interwar years.

Originally, both Nagy and Kádár had primarily been politicians, or more precisely, communist functionaries. According to András Hegedüs, a member of the

Hungarian Politburo in 1951–56, Prime Minister in 1955–56, and in the 1960s a dissident sociologist, the functionary mentality has two main traits: (1) faith in the infallibility and omnipotence of the party, and (2) belief in the mission of the party and its functionaries to save the world.<sup>1</sup> To this can be a further feature in the Central and East European region: the faith not simply in the party, but in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its leaders.

Nagy was already showing an inclination to depart from this pattern in the early stages of his career,<sup>2</sup> probably because of his intellectual leanings, which prompted him several times in his life to weigh political problems not just as a party functionary, but after the fashion of a *party intellectual*.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1896, Nagy had no university education; indeed he never finished secondary school either. He joined the Bolshevik movement in 1918 while he was a prisoner of war and was a low-level functionary by the end of the Russian Civil War. On his return to Hungary, he committed himself wholly to the communist movement, which was illegal at the time, only some five years later.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the 1920s, however, he was a relatively successful local functionary in the south-west Hungarian town of Kaposvár, when he was offered a post as a senior provincial organizer. This Nagy declined, saying he wanted to devote most of his time to researching Hungary's agrarian problems. This set him off on a path of intellectual "specialization".<sup>5</sup> During the great internal debates among the Hungarian communists in 1928–9, Nagy took a position close to that of György Lukács's famous Blum Theses.<sup>6</sup> Lukács, Nagy and their associates were defeated in the debate, and Nagy was then sent to the Soviet Union, where he joined the staff of the COMINTERN International Agrarian Institute, on the borderline between a functionary and a party intellectual, but closer to the latter.<sup>7</sup> Imre Nagy survived the great purge (although he lost his job) because he did not belong to the Hungarian elite of functionaries in Moscow and because he was presumably helped after his arrest in 1938 by the political police, for which he was an informer. By the end of 1944, he was a functionary again, a Politburo member, and a communist minister in the new coalition government.

The communist party was very short of cadres and Nagy had considerable value, with his pleasing personality and ability to mix, and the fact that he was not a Jew, unlike most of his colleagues. Surviving the purges was a kind of passport or guarantee of his reliability. But when the question came up of a rapid change to a Soviet-type system, he again expressed his doubts and gave voice to them in internal debates. He sought an 'alternative' model that would not break with the teleological aims of the international movement, but would be different from the Soviet model. The key again was the "transition" (like it was in the Blum Theses) during which Nagy and others did not think the Soviet line had to be followed mechanically, or if so, then only the New Economic Policy. The transition was equal to a revolution, but the violent and coercive elements of that could be

avoided, or at least contained. If not entirely consciously, Nagy, with his doctrinaire functionary approach, was combating also intellectual considerations. He started out from the real situation, the realities of society, not only from ideology or policy. By Nagy, the conditions, society and traditions of Hungary (and Central Europe) differed from those of 1917 Russia.

Nagy eventually suffered defeat again. And this time too he followed Bolshevik ritual, exercising self-criticism and withdrawing his position. He was exiled from the leadership temporarily in 1949, but allowed back a year later. As a minister, he helped to implement the agricultural policy of which he had been the main critic.

The next stage in Nagy's search was his 1953 premiership.<sup>8</sup> The post-Stalin Soviet Politburo saw him as a functionary capable of making the necessary policy correction in Hungary, while his intellectual bent prompted him to devise reforms. Nagy as a politician suffered defeat again, at the hands of the political opponents of correction, Rákosi and the orthodox Stalinists. But this time he did not practice self-criticism. Using illness as a pretext, he withdrew into "internal exile", and looked back on his work as prime minister in a series of political essays written in 1955–56.<sup>9</sup> He argued that the changes of the New Course had been needful because the Stalinist system had reached a state of crisis in Hungary. To that extent, Nagy appeared to be a reformer, although he never used the word and did not see himself as such. He saw the change in essence as a return to the development path broken off in 1947–48. This he had altered by 1956, emphasizing already on the evening of October 23, when he addressed the demonstrators in Budapest's Kossuth tér, that there had to be a return to the "New Course of June 1953".

By then, that was insufficient as a political program, but intellectually, Nagy had already gone further than that. The last of the essays mentioned earlier were written nine months before the revolution. One of them, *Ethics and Morals in Hungarian Public Life*, was a passionate criticism of the system of tyranny. Another recorded his opposition in principle to "Stalinism". His analysis of foreign policy rested on the principle of national independence, with "active", Yugoslav-style neutrality, and non-alignment as the aim.<sup>10</sup> So, although his decisions in 1956 did not have direct political antecedents, he had prepared them in his mind. A big part in this was played by the opposition circle of real reformers among the party intelligentsia, who organized themselves around him. They saw in Nagy both a politician and an intellectual conversation partner. The needle, however, was moving towards the politician and functionary in his case, while with the others, it was moving in the opposite direction. This created conflicts, but the opposition circle was a formative influence on Nagy's image and politics nonetheless.<sup>11</sup>

János Kádár, born in 1912, grew up during the Great Depression. To him the underground communist movement seemed like a chance to escape from multiple marginality. (He was illegitimate, growing up in a broken family or without a

family at all, failed to complete middle school, studied a trade but never worked in it, suffered unemployment, etc.)<sup>12</sup> Ideology was never important to him and did not affect his choice of communism, although by most of the recollections he was a talented young man. His conflicts arose out of movement praxis; when arrested on one occasion he confessed to the police (instead of denying everything). Nonetheless, he advanced quite rapidly. In 1943 he was secretary (leader) of the Hungarian communist “party”, which had seventy to eighty members. This he dissolved, only to reconstitute it under a new name, the Peace Party.<sup>13</sup> In Kádár’s case too, the want of experienced cadres led to him becoming a Politburo member almost immediately in 1945, and in 1948, he was appointed interior minister. He hardly differed from his fellow leaders, other than perhaps being a more talented organizer or better speaker. He behaved to his Muscovite superiors with genuine respect. After the fall of László Rajk, he was the party’s most promising young leader and a potential successor to Rákosi. In 1951 he was arrested and falsely condemned, but this was unconnected with any kind of conflict. Prison caused a severe trauma in Kádár, who was otherwise of a quiet and peaceful nature.<sup>14</sup>

Communists convicted in show trials usually reacted to imprisonment in one of two ways. One type began to distance themselves, while in prison, from communist praxis and ideology, and to conduct a critical examination of their own earlier activity. This typically intellectual approach could lead to a break with being or thinking like a functionary at all, or “complete release” from the movement. The other blamed their predicament merely on errors of praxis and tried to return to the bosom of the movement. Such people would call for full (legal, political and financial) rehabilitation, which the first type saw as secondary. Kádár, released in 1954, belonged to the second type and continued to identify with the party.<sup>15</sup> He sought (and found) in the state-security apparatus the “errors” that had landed him in prison. He was still in some agreement with some of the charges – feelings of guilt for having dissolved the party in 1943, for instance. But such identification offered Kádár, who thought in simple terms, an easier explanatory path than analysis of the whole system or its mechanics would have done. His feelings of guilt and his unimpaired respect for authority prevented him from thinking about who was responsible. But there was another consideration. Kádár was not just a victim; he was also implicated in the arrest and conviction of László Rajk. He might have found the one responsible in his case, but he himself was guilty and accountable in other respects.

Of all the functionaries released in 1954, Kádár had held the highest office; he was Deputy General Secretary of the party until 1951. It would have been logical for him to join Prime Minister Imre Nagy in his battle against the enemies of the New Course. That is not what happened. For Kádár, the strong political division conjured up the specter of a party split. Kádár loathed situations where he had to choose instead of following a clear line. The subjects under debate in 1954 – seek-

ing a path in principle and practice, different models of socialist construction – were simply alien to Kádár’s thinking. He rejected Imre Nagy’s approaches and expressed loyalty to Rákosi instead.<sup>16</sup>

When Nagy fell in the spring of 1955, Kádár probably reckoned that the danger of a party split had passed. He began to call for full political rehabilitation (i. e., a return to the post he had held on his arrest or a similar one).<sup>17</sup> He eventually contented himself with being appointed a county secretary of the party, which also gave him Central Committee membership. But he did not dissociate himself from Nagy in opposition either. In fact, he was one of the first readers of Nagy’s political essays. He was afraid Rákosi would take total control again, but his doubts about Nagy had not lessened. He saw a role for himself in moderating the party opposition. One opposition member recalled later, “Kádár explained at length that our task now was to avoid the counter-blow... What was important – mobilizing public opinion – had been done... Kádár said that Rákosi should not be shaken. I said he was shaken already. ‘Yes, that’s just the trouble, because the proletariat backs Rákosi, he is a saint to the proletarians.’”<sup>18</sup> Political discourse to Kádár’s mind was solely for party opinion or the core of active party functionaries. You only had to watch “the proletarians” (society or “the people”).

After the twentieth congress of the CPSU, “public opinion” in the Hungarian party was asking who had been responsible for the show trials. What was at stake for Kádár was the role he would get: would he be cast as a “victim” or an “accomplice”? Like a true chess player, he managed to display himself as the former and make that a part of the contest for supreme power. Rákosi’s efforts to compromise Kádár failed.<sup>19</sup> But the post-congress Soviet leadership had noticed him: Mikoyan had a long talk with Kádár in Budapest in July 1956.<sup>20</sup> Kádár gave “public opinion in the party” as his reason for not trusting in Rákosi any more, but he paid no regard to the real “public opinion” being voiced by the party opposition. In July, Ernő Gerő was elected in Rákosi’s place. Both the departing dictator and Gerő had recommended that Kádár should succeed, but a majority of the Politburo and observers in Moscow remained mistrustful of the “rehabilitated” one. Kádár regained his pre-1951 positions and the possibility of further advance remained open to him.

On October 25, 1956, Kádár became the top man in the party. It took both Nagy and Kádár several days to realize what had happened. When he was elected, Kádár also saw the solution in what the radicals of the party opposition – Ferenc Donáth and Géza Losonczy – were recommending and Nagy had accepted. This meant accepting many of the demands being made in the uprising, to negotiate, and to end the armed conflicts. They hoped to “disarm” the revolution at a point where the hegemony of the communist party remained and the system was still guaranteed by Hungary’s Soviet alliance. But Kádár, unlike Nagy, saw nothing forward-looking in the revolution. Kádár trusted the party public opinion, but it had

dissipated during the revolution. He was plain scared of society. Nagy spoke later of “several signs by which he was aware that by around November 1 the events had to be classed as a ‘revolution.’” Although he added, “There are some blood-thirsty acts of terror that point to counterrevolution as well. [But Kádár] either did not believe that turning to the people could secure with their assistance development, restoration of order and work, or did not agree that the state and party apparatus should be democratized; yet this was an indispensable condition for winning and sustaining the confidence of the people.”<sup>21</sup> This kind of democratization (which did not mean democracy in the original or present-day sense of the word, of course) fitted very well into Imre Nagy’s concept of socialism. For Kádár, there could only be a sense in “rational” democratization or democratization that remained within the limits of what was tolerated by Moscow.

Kádár in the Kremlin on November 2, 1956 voiced only his fears, still ignorant of what they planned for him or for Hungary. “If Soviet troops are withdrawn in a short time... our party and other parties could take over the fight against counter-revolution. But I am not entirely sure of success... The realistic danger: the counter-revolution may sweep these coalition parties aside. In my opinion, there is another way – to retain Hungary by military force. But then there will be armed clashes. Crushing by military force involves bloodshed. What happens afterwards? The moral position of the communists is nullified.”<sup>22</sup> This ties in with his frequently (and usually incompletely) quoted Budapest radio speech of November 1, where he referred both to the “glorious uprising of the people” and “the counterrevolutionary danger” that might lead to “foreign intervention”.<sup>23</sup> But he was motivated not only by his fears, but by the desire to retain power. He did not inform Nagy (or anyone else) about the summons from the Russians. When he had been told in Moscow where the acceptable limits ran, he accepted the job of heading a counter-government. That choice led directly to the execution of Nagy, with whom Kádár never met again. Nagy remained for him a living antithesis of all he had done during and after 1956. This applied to Nagy who denied the existence of the Kádárite dichotomy between “party opinion” and “people”, because he had managed in 1953 and then in 1956 to mobilize (intellectual) public opinion in the party and speak to Hungarian society at the same time, the Nagy who exemplified (or might have exemplified) that there was a choice between adjusting to the Empire and articulated social demands. According to Kádár, neither of those was possible, which is why he did not want to allow to remain in the land of the living the man who personified the denial of his ideas.

It was the different perception of the 1956 events that made the final conflict between the two so dramatic and tragic in the end. Nagy saw 1956 as a chance of a breakthrough for anti-Stalinism, despite the highly disadvantageous circumstances of open and armed revolt. He believed that his popularity in the Hungarian society combined with his contacts in Moscow would suffice to explain the

situation to everyone. Society would accept some “mild” subordination to the Soviet empire, while the Soviets would understand (and accept) what an anti-Stalinist revolution entailed. He failed in both respects. For Kádár, 1956 was first of all a practical question of power. Moderate and flexible anti-Stalinism was only a tool to reach the peak of power or retain it if need be. A more or less autonomous personality, Nagy, encountered a half- or non-autonomous one, Kádár. A person with ability to high morality at some point met somebody who did not bother with any kind of morality in most cases. At this point, the paths of Nagy and Kádár intersected, instead of converging; for 1956 actually became the meeting point of Kádár and the post-Stalinist, Khrushchevite Soviet leadership instead.

### Notes

- 1 Hegedüs, András, “A funkcionárius”. *Századvég* (Budapest), 6–7(1988), 123–132. Of course there is a massive literature on the mindset of the communist functionary, including classic accounts such as Arthur Koestler’s (*Darkness At Noon*) and Milovan Djilas’s (*The New Class*). The problem is summarized in János Kornai, *The Socialist System. The Political Economy of Communism*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.
- 2 On Nagy, see Méray, Tibor, *Thirteen Days that Shook the Kremlin*, translated by Howard L. Katzander. New York: Praeger, 1959; Molnár, Miklós, and László Nagy, *Imre Nagy – Réformateur ou révolutionnaire?* Geneva: Publications de Hautes Études Internationales, No. 33, 1959; Unwin, Peter, *Voice in the Wilderness. Imre Nagy and the Hungarian Revolution*. London, Macdonald, 1991; Rainer, János M., *Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz* (Imre Nagy. A Political Biography). 2 vols. Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996 and 1999.
- 3 The term “intellectual” applies here to those who produce ideas of transcontextual value accepted by society, thereby orienting and regulating people’s behavior. In the period when Nagy was active, the first distinct ‘party intelligentsia’ emerged, the values it conveyed deriving directly or indirectly from communist ideology or the current communist policy line. This system of values was accepted by a segment of society varying in size (usually a minority), but the political authorities nonetheless rewarded the mediating group with intellectual status and concomitant material benefits. The party intelligentsia also acted as policy and other specialist advisers to the top leadership, playing a big part in so-called political education and the media. It became numerous after the communists took power, but dwindled later during the process of emancipation by the intelligentsia. However, it survived the classical Stalinist regime and vestiges persisted right up to 1989.
- 4 On the history of the illegal Hungarian communist movement, see Molnár, Miklós, *From Béla Kun to János Kádár: Seventy Years of Hungarian Communism*. Translated by Arnold J. Pomerans. New York etc.: Berg, 1990; György Borsányi, *The Life of a Communist Revolutionary, Béla Kun*, Translated by Mario D. Fenyő. Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs/Highland Lakes, NJ: Atlantic Research and Publications, 1993 (Eastern European Monographs 263).
- 5 For a more detailed intellectual portrait of Nagy, see Rainer, János M.: “The Development of Imre Nagy as a Politician and a Thinker.” *Contemporary European History*, 6:3 (1997), 263–277.

- 6 'Blum' was Lukács's illegal communist acronym. The essence of his theses was that "in the event of a revolution" in Hungary, proletarian dictatorship would be preceded by a "transitional stage" undefined in many respects. The transition had to resolve so-called "bourgeois democratic tasks", such as democratic land reform and freedom rights. Then only could Hungary turn to socialism (of a Soviet or possibly other type). Thereafter, the "transition" became a decisive political and theoretical issue for Nagy.
- 7 The institute was a backup institution for COMINTERN, dealing mainly with international agrarian policy and comparative "research". This was not agricultural studies in the classic sense, but the peasant policies of communist parties. Two "fields" were examined: the agricultural situation of individual countries, mainly through statistics, and the stratification, living standard, and main social and political problems of the peasantry, along with various movements pursuing peasant policy and representing the peasantry. This is where the various communist parties' agrarian theses, action programs and brochures and pamphlets on peasant and agricultural topics were prepared or assessed.
- 8 Rainer, János M., *The New Course in Hungary in 1953*. Washington: The Woodrow Wilson Center Cold War International History Project. Working Paper No. 38, 2002.
- 9 *Imre Nagy on Communism: In Defense of the New Course*. New York: Praeger, 1957. <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5959976>.
- 10 Nagy, Imre: "The Five Basic Principles of International Relations and the Question of Our Foreign Policy." In: *Imre Nagy on Communism...*, 20–42.
- 11 On the party opposition, see Aczél, Tamás and Méray, Tibor: *The Revolt of the Mind*, New York: Praeger, 1959; Molnár, Miklós, *Budapest 1956*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971, 56–69; Péteri, György, "New Course Economics: The Field of Economic Research in Hungary after Stalin." *Journal of Contemporary European History*, 6:3 (1997); Hegedüs, András B.: "The Petőfi Circle: The Forum of Reform in 1956." In: Cox, Terry, ed.: *Hungary 1956 – Forty Years On*. London/Portland OR: Frank Cass, 1997, 108–134.
- 12 Huszár, Tibor: *Kádár János politikai életrajza* (Political biography of János Kádár), Vol. 1, 1912–1956. Budapest: Szabad Tér Kiadó, 2001.
- 13 Kádár and the illegal party's leaders knew of the dissolution of COMINTERN, but they were not in touch with Moscow. So they thought this was an adequate step to take. This was the number of party members still at large; a few hundred others being in prison or on labor service at the front.
- 14 Varga, László (ed. and intr.): *Kádár János bírái előtt. Egyszer fent, egyszer lent 1949–1956* (János Kádár before his judges. Once up, once down). Budapest: Osiris/Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 2001, 11–151.
- 15 This was described very aptly by Béla Szász, who met Kádár not long after his release. See Szász, Béla, *Volunteers for the Gallows: The Anatomy of a Show-Trial*, translated by Kathleen Szász. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972.
- 16 He wrote in a letter to Rákosi dated November 12, 1954, that "it is not defensible, in my view, for the general secretary of the MDP [Hungarian Workers' Party] not to stand in the foreground, for the Central Committee not to be directed by the government and from the government, but the other way round." Kádár's letter to Rákosi, Nov. 11, 1954. In: Varga, L. (ed. and intr.), *op. cit.*, 646.
- 17 *Ibid.* Kádár's letter to the MDP Politburo, 651–652.
- 18 Memoirs of Jenő Széll, see Körösi, Zsuzsanna and Molnár, Adrienne: "Kádár János emlékezete. Összeállítás az 1956-os Intézet Oral History Archivumának interjúiból" (Memoirs of Kádár. Selection of interviews in the Archives of the 1956 Institute). In: Rácz, Árpád (ed.), *Ki volt Kádár? Harag és részrehajlás nélkül a Kádár-életéről* (Who was Kádár? On Kádár's career, without anger or bias). Budapest: Rubicon/Aquila, 2001, 176.

- 19 Rákosi played several people a tape of László Rajk's interrogation on June 7, 1949, or showed them a transcript of it. This was conducted jointly by Mihály Farkas and János Kádár. The text was first published by Tibor Hajdu, "Farkas és Kádár Rajknál" (Farkas and Kádár with Rajk). *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1992:4, 70–89. On the part Kádár played in the case, see Hajdu, Tibor, "A Rajk-per háttere és fázisai" (Background and phases of the Rajk trial). *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1992:11, 17–36, and Varga, L. (ed. and intr.), *Kádár János bírái előtt* (János Kádár before his judges). Budapest: Osiris, 2001, 669–680.
- 20 Andropov's report on the Mikoyan-Kádár meeting, July 14, 1956. In: *Sovjetsky Soyuz i vengersky krizis 1956 goda. Dokumenti*. Ed. and intr. by E. D. Orekhova, V. T. Sereda and A. S. Stikalin. Moszkva: Rosspen, 1998, 160–168.
- 21 Nagy's remarks were quoted under questioning by György Fazekas, a party opposition journalist, in August 1957. Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, V-150.001/1. dossier, 39–40.
- 22 Working Notes from the CPSU CC Presidium Session, Nov 2, 1956. In: *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*. Compiled, ed. and intr. by Békés, Csaba, Malcolm Byrne and János M. Rainer. Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2002, 339.
- 23 Varga, László (New York), ed.: *A forradalom hangja. Magyarországi rádióadások 1956. október 23 – november 9*. (Voice of revolution. Radio broadcasts in Hungary, October 23–November 9, 1956). Budapest: Századvég /Nyilvánosság Klub, 1989, 370–371.