

Year 1989

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Hungary

The revolution which broke out on 23 October, 1956, was a turning point in the post-war history of Hungary. Within a few days, democracy was restored and the government headed by Imre Nagy withdrew from the Warsaw Pact. However, hopes were wrecked by the second intervention of the Soviet Army, started on 4 November. Due to the lack of support from the West, the heroic resistance of the insurgents was overcome.

Almost three thousand Hungarians died in the fights, thousands were injured, and over 200,000 refugees left the country. The new government, installed by the Soviets and headed by János Kádár, started mass repressive measures. Over 22,000 people were sentenced and 229 executed. Among the latter was Imre Nagy, buried in an anonymous grave.

After several years of repression and crushing all forms of resistance, the Kádár regime relaxed its policy. The economic reforms implemented in the 1960s improved the standard of living. In the course of time, the policy of the Hungarian government came to be called „goulash communism”. Due to the memories of the bloody repression, no widespread opposition activity was carried out for years. Integration of opposition circles began no sooner than in the second half of

the 1970s, under the influence of e.g. Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. In the first half of the 1980s, further opposition groups emerged and independent newspapers were published.

The policy of perestroika announced by Mikhail Gorbachev stimulated the activity of reformatory circles in the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt). The opposition became consolidated, as well. The main opposition groups were: the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum), founded in October 1987, the Fidesz (an acronym of Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, Alliance of Young Democrats), established in March 1988, and the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége), set up in November 1988. In autumn 1988, the reconstruction process of historical opposition parties was instituted.

On 15 March, 1988, the first mass demonstration of the opposition in years took place in Budapest. In the following months, more such demonstrations were organized, but the attitude of the government was ambivalent: sometimes they used force, sometimes they tolerated the gatherings. For example, in June 1988 the demonstrators who wanted to commemorate Imre Nagy were brutally dispersed, but two weeks later the government remained silent on the demonstration of solidarity with the Hungarians persecuted in Romania. On 23 October, the police forces attacked the demonstrators who gathered on the anniversary of the 1956 Revolution.

In 1988, the reformatory faction won in a conflict within the Party. Kádár resigned from his position in May 1988, and Károly Grósz, who was considered a liberal, became the new Secretary

General of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. In November 1988, another reformer, Miklós Németh, became the Prime Minister. The new leaders decided to implement far-reaching changes within the political system. As soon as on 11 February, 1989, the Party approved the reconstruction of the multiparty system and soon tens of new political groups emerged. At the same time, the evaluation of the events of 1956 changed: now they were considered a national uprising.

On 22 March, 1989, the major opposition groups resolved to coordinate their actions. The Round Table of the Opposition was established to work out a common stance on the most vital issues and to follow a uniform policy towards the government. At the beginning of April, the Party tried to start individual negotiations with selected groups, but this idea was rejected. Finally, on 13 June, 1989, the „triangular table” talks were started among the government, the opposition and representatives of social organizations and trade unions.

Three days later, on 16 June about 25,000 people participated in the ceremonial funeral of Imre Nagy in Budapest. He was formally rehabilitated on 6 July. Symbolically, János Kádár died on the same day. Meanwhile, in May 1989, the removal of border guards on the Austrian frontier began. In September the frontier was fully open in order to enable thousands of citizens of the German Democratic Republic to escape.

Negotiations were finished on 18 September. The most important element of the concluded agreement was the announcement of free parliamentary elections. However, since many

vital issues (e.g. the election of the President or the property of the Communist party) were not solved, Fidesz and the Alliance of Free Democrats did not sign the agreement. These problems were settled during a referendum on 26 November.

On 7 October, 1989, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was dissolved and the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt), based on the former Party, was founded. On 18 October, the Parliament amended the Constitution, formally establishing the multiparty system. Five days later, the name of the state was changed from the „People's Republic of Hungary” to the „Republic of Hungary.”

On 25 March, 1990, the first free parliamentary elections in the East-Central Europe took place in Hungary. The elections were won by the Hungarian Democratic Forum. József Antall became the new Prime Minister, and Árpád Göncz took office as the President.



Budapest, October, 1956 (FLA/Rue des Archives/FORUM)



Hungary, 15 March, 1989 (Krzysztof Miller/Agencja Gazeta)



Anniversary of the 1956 Revolution, 23 October 1989 (Topham Picturepoint/FORUM)

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