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Volume 20
Number 1

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THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION IN HUNGARY AND THE LESSONS OF THE 1956 STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

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This presentation will discuss why Hungary has experienced a rather inordinate number of both bloodless and violent revolutions, encompassing urban uprisings as those of 1918 and 1919, and national struggles for independence in 1703–1711, 1848–1849, and 1956. The explanation may lie in the fact that the country has had a long tradition of absolute sovereignty under the leadership of a powerful nobility; yet, because it lies on the crossroads of great migrations and invasions, it was often subjugated by great powers. Remarkably, in each case the national cause was combined with a strong movement for social justice.

Keywords: Hungarian revolutions, 1703–1711, 1848–1849, 1918–1919, 1956

Revolutionary tradition in Hungary, which is what our gracious hosts have asked me to discuss, is an exciting topic. Undoubtedly, it has also caused me a great deal of headache because the more I thought about it, the more I realized that what was expected from me was to furnish an explanation why Hungarians fought and lost their revolutions during the last three centuries. I wonder whether such an explanation is possible.

Please note at this point that I do not consider the peasant revolts of earlier centuries, revolutions.

In my presentation, I'll try to show that the Hungarian revolutions invariably originate from the real or perceived grievances of the social elite. Even though the grievances were directed primarily at the foreign power that held sway over the country, every one of these movements also contained a demand for substantial domestic reform. In each case, however, the movement for reform was hijacked, we might say, by people outside the social elite who turned it into a violent upheaval. This, then, caused an ever-growing section of the elite to demand the restoration of law and order by the very same foreign power against which the social elite had rebelled in the first place.

And now for a bit of an explanation.

Like Poland, its historic soul brother, Hungary was a respected and dynamic middle-sized kingdom in medieval times. Later, however, both kingdoms fell on hard times. In the mid-sixteenth century, Hungary was divided into three parts, regaining its unity and political sovereignty only in 1867; Poland, which was literally abolished late in the eighteenth century, did not regain its unity and independence until 1918. Yet throughout the centuries of division and foreign rule, the existence of these nations was never in doubt for the simple reason that within both countries the historic landowning nobility remained firmly in control. This nobility arrogated to itself the very concept of the nation: they were the *populus*, the *gens*, the *natio*, the citizens, the tribe, the nation; the others were the *misera plebs contribuens*, the poor tax-paying population. The traditional concept of Hungary and Poland as two noble, warrior nations remained alive over the centuries, and once foreign rule had come to an end, both countries became militantly nationalistic states. Thus we must consider that the reform movements in Hungary and Poland invariably aimed not only at freeing the country from foreign domination but also at tackling the problem of noble rule. Some in the reform movements wished to overthrow the ruling elite; others hoped to make the country free and more prosperous in co-operation with the old elite, and again others fought for liberty and reform in order to perpetuate the predominant position of the old elite.

What complicated matters enormously was the practical absence of a native urban middle class, which meant that the reformers themselves generally stemmed from the noble estate. Thus, with every radical action the reformers threatened the welfare of their own families and friends. As a consequence, most of the noble revolutionaries were eager to achieve national independence as well as to improve conditions in their country without thereby fatally endangering the pre-eminent position of their own class. The effort wasn't always successful because, inevitably, the continued pre-eminence of the old social elite was endangered by new elements of society who had come to the fore as a result of the upheavals.

It is an irony of history that the revolution of 1956 in some ways represented a repetition of the old pattern: namely, progressive members of the old elite, in this case dissident Communist intellectuals, had created a radical reformist movement which, in turn, brought forward such elements from other strata of society who had new and very different goals, and who threatened the security and welfare of the Communist cadres. These new elements, mostly workers and students, brought the conflict into the streets thereby precipitating armed intervention from abroad. Foreign intervention then put an end to both domestic reform and the nation's striving for political independence. As in the early 1700s, in 1848–1849, and in 1919, armed intervention from abroad dissipated the dreams of the elite reformers while simultaneously securing the future of the elite to which the reformers belonged.

Now one more general remark: even though the word “revolution” has been endlessly debased and abused, witness such terms as “revolution in the making of false eyelashes,” one of the more viable definitions of the revolution is a violent attempt, by a large number of people, to institute drastic changes through the overthrow of the political system and of the prevailing social order. Measured by this definition, not all of the great historical events I have mentioned qualify as revolutions. Certainly, October 1918 and October 1956 were true revolutions because of their mass character and their overarching aims, but the proper characterization of the other great events is debatable. Consider that the professed aim of the Rákóczi and the Kossuth rebellions was not to overthrow the existing social and political order but to put an end to the abuses perpetrated by the king’s evil advisers and to restore the ancient rights of the nation. And as far as the events of March 1919 are concerned, while it is true that Béla Kun and his companions advocated the annihilation of the existing social order, for which they were able to mobilize a considerable number of people, the Communists had come to power through peaceful negotiations. No matter, in my talk I’ll treat the Rákóczi Rebellion of 1703–1711; the War of Independence in 1848–1849; the democratic and Communist takeovers in 1918–1919, and the events of 1956 as revolutions.

*

Prince Ferenc Rákóczi’s rebellion or uprising against Habsburg rule marked the culmination of growing public discontent with the way the Habsburg dynasty treated Hungary, or rather its ruling elite. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Hungary was divided between an Ottoman dominated center, an autonomous Principality of Transylvania, and a rather small sliver in the west, called Royal Hungary. Until the 1680s, only the latter part recognized a Habsburg king as its ruler but then, in an extraordinary effort, Europeans combined their forces to rid Central Europe of the Ottomans. By 1699, almost all of Hungary, including Transylvania, had fallen into the hands of European history’s last crusaders.

The campaign represented a great victory for Western Christianity, to which Hungary belonged, but the crusaders extracted a heavy price from the Hungarians for their liberation. As a result, Hungarians in 1699 were no more grateful to their Christian liberators than their descendants were to the Red Army in 1945. Among other things, the Hungarian Diet had to recognize the Habsburgs’ hereditary right to the Hungarian crown; the nobility had to give up its right to resist an unlawfully acting ruler; much of the devastated countryside was ceded to foreign money lenders and purveyors; and Catholicism, the religion of the Habsburgs, was force-fed to the mostly Protestant Hungarian nobility. On the opposite side, the Habsburg administration saw little reason for treating the Hungarians any better:

the country was infested with bandits and was economically almost worthless; moreover, the Hungarian nobles had proven themselves most fickle in their loyalties. During the previous two centuries, the greatest dignitaries in the realm switched sides again and again from Turks to Habsburgs to Transylvanian princes, often immensely benefiting from the change of loyalties. How could one forget the Turkish and Tatar marauders of the great Hungarian magnate Count Imre Thököly who had repeatedly invaded and devastated the country? Or that the Hungarian hussars, who had participated in the Christian re-conquest of Buda Castle in 1686 from the Turks, had fought on the kuruc, that is on the Turkish side, just a few weeks earlier. Similarly, in February 1945, some Hungarian troops participated bravely in the Soviet siege of Buda Castle, but the Soviets would not easily forget that the same Hungarians had been serving on the German side only a few days earlier.

Hungarians at the turn of eighteenth century regarded every Habsburg move as a humiliation and a mark of oppression. At last, a countrywide rebellion broke out under Prince Rákóczi, a Catholic magnate, who led an army made up of mostly Protestant nobles and of peasants of all nationalities and denominations. The peasants or better, serfs, had been suffering much less from Habsburg rule than from their heavy feudal obligations and the near-total devastation of the land. True, Prince Rákóczi now proclaimed the unity of all the estates and promised freedom to the serfs who had served him well; still, when the other kuruc leaders spoke of the grievances of the “noble Hungarian nation”, they meant precisely that: the injustices that had been visited on the nobility, which alone constituted the nation.

It would be good to know how many people in the country sympathized with the imperial Austrian and how many with the revolutionary Hungarian side. Thousands of Hungarian subjects of the Habsburg emperor-king served in both armies, but we must keep in mind that more than half of the king’s Hungarian subjects were not Magyar-speakers. In any case, in those times, nationality counted for next-to-nothing and membership in one or another estate for nearly everything. Young men had become soldiers so as not to be killed by the marauding military, or in order not to starve to death, or simply, because they had been pressed into service. The pattern would be repeated in every revolution. Still, it is also certain that a good number of young men joined the Hungarian ranks voluntarily in order to fight “Pro Libertate”, for freedom. Only that for noble recruits freedom meant national independence and the preservation of noble privilege, whereas for the serfs in the revolutionary ranks, it meant freedom from feudal dues and services as well as, hopefully, a piece of land to be held in hereditary tenure. The two different goals were not really reconcilable.

Habsburg military victories as well as the devastation of the land and terrible human losses because of the plague caused Rákóczi’s followers gradually to

abandon his flag. The rebellion ended in 1711 in a great compromise, certainly not the last in Hungarian revolutionary history. According to the terms of Hungarian surrender no rebel soldier was punished; the kuruc troops were to swear fealty to the emperor-king, and the nobility was to be confirmed in its privileges and rights. Yet one of the country's main problem remained unresolved, namely the complex relationship between the center of power in Vienna and the periphery, that is the fifty odd Hungarian counties dominated by the landowning nobility. The question throughout the century was who would reform the country: the central bureaucracy or enlightened elements among the nobility. Co-operation between the two was not inconceivable, but it occurred rarely. More often, the grievances of the county nobility and the arbitrariness of the Court in Vienna paralyzed each other.

Things changed fundamentally with the rise of European nationalisms and the growing conviction within the Hungarian elite that the nation would perish unless Hungarian was established as the language of official communications, and when all the inhabitants of the realm accepted the notion that they were Hungarian patriots, irrespective of the language they were speaking. Moreover, all the inhabitants of the kingdom were to be given the rights and privileges of the nobility so that together they might constitute a great nation.

Reforms came gradually until events sped up immeasurably with the outbreak of the European revolutions in 1848, which temporarily paralyzed Vienna and allowed the more radical elements in the Hungarian noble establishment to introduce drastic reforms. Even though the Hungarian reformers exploited the temporary weakness of the central power in Vienna, the liberal constitution of March–April 1848 marked the triumph of legality; theirs was a bloodless revolution, or as I like to say, a lawful revolution. Bloodshed came several months later because Vienna wished to undo some of the concessions it had made to the Hungarians, concessions that, it is true, had made the efficient governing of the Monarchy very difficult. In addition, during the summer of 1848, Lajos Kossuth and his colleagues considerably sharpened Hungarian governmental policy toward the Court, the Austrian government, Croatia, and the national minorities. On the other side, the national minorities, who together constituted an absolute majority of the kingdom's inhabitants, wished to achieve some of the same liberties and privileges that the Hungarians had wrested from the king. In other words, the ethnic minorities opposed the centralizing policy of the Hungarian leaders in the same way that the Hungarians opposed the centralizing tendencies of Vienna. The result was war between Hungary and the rest of the Monarchy as well as a civil war within Hungary.

By the time the followers of Kossuth were definitely defeated, in August 1848, most Hungarians had abandoned his cause. But the revolution had not been fought in vain; the Hungarians had lost the war but they would win the peace for the simple reason that the Habsburg Monarchy of that time was no longer a great power.

Rather, it was a combination of many territorial entities, which could function only if these entities were willing to co-operate. Because without Hungary the Habsburg Monarchy was inoperable, a compromise agreement became inevitable, and it was concluded, in 1867, making Hungary an equal partner with the rest of the Monarchy.

The ensuing liberal era allowed for unprecedented prosperity and progress. At the same time the liberal government's tough nationalist policy exasperated the increasingly dynamic ethnic minorities. Moreover, the Monarchy's shortsighted foreign policy as well as the aggressive hostility of some of Austria-Hungary's neighbors led to World War I; here, the Dual Monarchy could not but lose.

The democratic "Chrysanthemum Revolution", at the end of October 1918, represented a dramatic departure from Hungary's entire political and social tradition. Hungary became a democratic republic that hoped to align itself not with Germany, its traditional protector, but with the Western democracies. The revolution also brought into the government, besides the usual nobles and bureaucrats of gentry origin, a good number of Social Democrats and radically-inclined Jewish intellectuals.

The republic of the Red Count, Mihály Károlyi, ended within a few months for such reasons as the incompetence of Károlyi; the utopian ideas of some of his underlings; the rapaciousness of Hungary's neighbors; and the narrow-minded hostility of the Western democracies. A take-over by the Communists and left-wing Social Democrats, in March 1919, was as inevitable as their ultimate collapse a mere four months later. The causes of that debacle were, again, the incompetence and utopian ideas of the Bolshevik leadership, the rapaciousness of Hungary's neighbors, and the hostility of the Western democracies. But there was one more important force to cause the collapse, namely the implacable hostility of the Hungarian social, business, and political elite toward the Republic of Soviets. Counts István Bethlen and Pál Teleki, not to speak of Admiral Miklós Horthy, would rather have Romanian and French colonial troops occupy the country than to tolerate Reds in power.

The conservatives' dream of violently restoring the status-quo-ante proved to be just a dream. During the counter-revolution, new, dubious elements came to the fore whom the old elite both needed and treated with contempt. These newcomers on the political scene wished to discard the Hungarian liberal-conservative constitutional tradition and to replace it with some kind of an anti-Semitic dictatorship. Although this extreme right was never able completely to overcome the resistance of the conservative establishment, it succeeded in bringing about a fundamental social change by gradually expropriating the wealth of Hungary's Jewish population. This way, between 1938 and 1944, approximately one fourth of the national wealth changed hands. Add to this the utter destruction wrought by the war and then it becomes clear that the post-1945 democratic regime con-

fronted a *tabula rasa* situation. Consequently, when the Communists seized power, in 1947–1948, they had a relatively easy time in expropriating whatever had not already been plundered.

What took place between 1938 and approximately 1952 was a genuine social revolution. True, rather than having been brought about by mass upheaval, it was the work of relatively small domestic forces operating under the tutelage of two successive great powers. The German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, and the Soviet liberation in the spring of 1945 allowed for more changes: political, cultural, social, and economic, than all the previous and later revolutions combined. In all this, the Hungarian people played mostly a passive role, either as beneficiaries of plunder or as the victims of plunder.

In 1953 attempts began to remedy some of the economic and moral damage caused to national life by the Nazi and Soviet takeovers and the cruel as well as often mindless social revolution. The summer and early fall of 1956 represented the culmination of the attempt to undo the damage and to institute a more humane form of Communist government. But again, as after 1703, in 1849, and in 1919, political developments took such a turn as to cause many within the reforming elite to fear for their welfare and dominant position. Therefore, they silently or not so silently welcomed the decision of an outside power to put a violent end to the revolution.

Back in the summer of 1849, much of the Hungarian elite quietly welcomed the law and order brought back by the invading Austrian and Russian armies. In 1919, the Romanian occupation of Budapest enabled the counter-revolutionary Whites to punish the unruly elements among the rural population and to make scapegoats out of the Jews. Finally on November 4, 1956, many sighed in relief that law and order was being re-established. Let us remember that the hundreds of thousands who marched carrying red flags on May 1, 1957 had not all been coerced to do so by the Communist authorities.

Yet let us also remember that it was always a foreign power that put an end to the revolutions: at the Battle of Trencsén, on August 3, 1708, where Habsburg troops irrevocably defeated Prince Ferenc Rákóczi's forces; at Temesvár, on August 9, 1849, where General Haynau triumphed over Kossuth's honvéd army; on August 1, 1919, when Romanian troops crossed the Tisza River and wiped out the Hungarian Red Army, and on November 4, 1956, when Soviet tanks rolled into the Hungarian capital. Nor were the Hungarian revolutions completely unsuccessful because, with or without a compromise agreement, many of the revolutionary ideas were gradually translated into reality, whether under Maria Theresa and Leopold II in the second half of the eighteenth century, or in 1867, or in 1945 or, finally, in 1989.