

# Reactions of Czechoslovakia to the Hungarian Uprising 1956

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## **Abstract**

The present study sums up the overall reaction of the Czechoslovak Communist Party establishment on the Hungarian uprising in 1956. As we can see from the sources, the Czechoslovak political elites pursued to prevent any kind of “harmful ideological infiltration” from Hungary by immediate and intensive military manoeuvres. As we look at the depth of the events: at the aims, strategy, and extent of the reactions on the side of the Czechoslovak political leadership, we can discover that Czechoslovakia regarded the situation so grave that it not only mobilised heavy forces (including State Police, State Security, Peoples Militia and military forces units) but it would have been ready to move in to Hungary if there had been such a need.

**Key words:** Czechoslovak Communist Party; Hungarian uprising 1956; ideological infiltration; State Police; State Security; Peoples Militia; military

**Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL:** History – Recent History – Post-War period (1950-1989)

How did the Czechoslovak state, geographically a direct neighbour of Hungary, and a political and military ally of the Socialist-bloc-countries, react to the 1956 uprising? As an introduction into the topic, the present study focuses on two distinguished levels of events, namely the immediate reactions of the official Czechoslovak political leadership, and the reactions of Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia to the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

The Czechoslovak Politburo held an emergency meeting right on October 24, 1956, explicitly as a reaction onto the Hungarian events. They did so in the absence of their First Secretary, Antonín Novotný who was on an official visit to Moscow. On October 27, a meeting of the Central Committee of the National Front took place and here again the Hungarian events were at the centre of the agenda. („Zasedání rozšířeného předsednictva ÚV Národního fronty jednal o přípravě III. sjezdu JZD a o situaci v Maďarsku.” See Buchvaldek, Miroslav (ed.): Československé dějiny v datech. Nakladatelství Svoboda, 1986, 515.) As a result of these meetings, one of Czechoslovakia’s first *official reactions* was an immediate and careful clampdown on civil liberties. During the autumn of 1956, the Czechoslovak communist government was very effective to suspend and/or control all civil liberties, among them curtailing the rights to assembly and to privacy, as well as limiting the freedom of speech.

The Czechoslovak State Security (*Štátna bezpečnosť, ŠtB*), which had already been in full scale operation since the early 1950s, was able to accelerate its pre-emptive operations in the troubled days of October 1956. Let us share just one numerical item which reflects the scale of the control of the Czechoslovak state over its citizens, including tapping private telephone conversations and the censorship of private letters. According to Karel Kaplan, in the period from October 23 to 29, 1956, the officers of the Czechoslovak State Security surveyed some 26.493 private letters out of the total 290.000 – which works out a manual check of almost 10% of all surface post sent in the country within a time span of a week. (Kaplan 2005, 448, 449, 471, 467)

As another pre-emptive measure, the Czechoslovak government rigorously required from all state employees a pledge of affiliation, and surveyed the general mood at the workplaces through communist party members. This process was carefully scheduled at the highest political level, at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Ústredný výbor Komunistickej strany Československa, ÚV KSČ*), and was operationally implemented through the Ministry of Interior by the State Police and the State Security. (Kaplan 2005, 476-477)

The Czechoslovak communist party establishment tried to prevent any kind of “harmful ideological infiltration” from Hungary by *immediate* and *intensive military manoeuvres*. The extent of these actions seemed substantial enough to prevent any unwanted activities. On October 24, the Minister of Interior ordered a partial mobilization of homeland military units, which order was upgraded to *full mobilization* on October 28 at all units of the State Police and the State Security. Deputy Minister of Interior, Jindřich Kotál was ordered to travel to Bratislava where he became an operative coordinator of all military events. At the same time, members of the Peoples Militia, equipped with handguns and live ammunition, were ordered to patrol the streets of the main cities Prague, Bratislava, Košice etc. (Kaplan 2005, 440, 441) According to Karel Kaplan, during the peak times of the events “in the last week of October, there were 12.540 people along the Hungarian border, 8.759 of whom were military personnel”, as well as there were “280 tanks and a considerable number of howitzers ready for combat”. (Kaplan 2005, 457)

The government also introduced a completely centralised filtering of press reporting, right from the very first day of the revolution. The first thing the Czechoslovak communist party leadership introduced was stopping the influx of the Hungarian newspapers to Czechoslovakia. Until October 1956, Hungarian newspapers such as the *Szabad Nép* and the *Irodalmi Újság* (both political dailies), and the *Lúdas Matyi* (a politico-satirical weekly) were imported into Czechoslovakia in relatively large numbers – their import, however, was stopped right after October 23, 1956. This kind of a restriction of the press was typical for a country which was involved in an ideological warfare, and this step hit badly especially the intelligentsia who was interested in international events. From this term on, in Czechoslovakia it was impossible to follow the details of the Hungarian events. And if we add to this the intensity of the rapidly changing set of events in Hungary (in Budapest and in the countryside), as a result we have to conclude that people in Czechoslovakia were simply unable to get a clear and nuanced picture of what exactly was happen-

ing in Hungary.

For the Czechoslovak communist party leadership, however, neither preventive military restrictions, nor strict control of the press were enough. The ÚV KSČ used some proactive measures, too, in the manner of “dezinformatsia”. This means that the Czechoslovak communist establishment started to use deliberately falsified information, as well as fake or intentionally distorted news. Personally, it was Bruno Köhler, one of the most devoted Stalinist at the Prague Politburo, who was sent to Bratislava in order to “lead the propaganda warfare against the Hungarian uprising”, and also in order to prevent any political rebellion in Slovak Communist Party circles. (Kiss 2002, 148)

We have hundreds of *ŠtB* reports as evidence on the true nature of the centrally directed propaganda campaign against the Hungarian uprising. According to these sources, for instance, someone in Bratislava talked in the presence of others of “Hungary currently trying to re-establish Saint Stephens’s Hungary that is the rule of the clergy led by Archbishop József Mindszenty. Their main goal with this is to spread the revolt to Slovakia, after which Hungary and Slovakia would unify as one country”. (Kaplan 2005, 512) Needless to say that no such unification plan had ever existed – but being afraid of the re-activation of the Roman Catholic Church structures, Czechoslovak authorities resorted to the state-organised anti-Mindszenty campaign. (József Mindszenty was a Hungarian Roman Catholic dignitary who was quite outspoken on several international issues.) Among the *ŠtB* files from the Autumn of 1956 there is a striking large number of reports in which secret agents are writing about people “being afraid of the return of the old system” and “of Horthy marches being sung again” and of “the return of Horthy’s clericalism” etc. (Kaplan 2005, 544, 577 etc.) In such a desinformative mood, it is perhaps not surprising that on November 3, 1956, the Czechoslovak President Antonín Zápotocký joined in; when he was speaking in the Prague broadcast on that day, he referred to the Hungarian events as “fascist white terror”. (Kaplan 2005, 455)

Considering that Czech and Slovak society had already been living under a rigid Stalinist-type state system since 1948, the description above seems to describe a rather intimidated society. Even though there are some reports that certain layers of Czech and Slovak society were indeed in favour of the Hungarian events in the autumn of 1956 (including the members of the Czech and Slovak intelligentsia, priests, etc.), it is fair to conclude that in general terms, Hungarian events in 1956 meant a *deep and fearful stress for Czechoslovak society*. It is safe to say that the majority of Slovaks and Czechs showed unswerving loyalty to the current Czechoslovak establishment. During the Hungarian crisis in 1956, most Czechs and Slovaks reacted with suppressed fear – which fear, however, does not seem genuine. In Karel Kaplan’s words, in 1956 “*party alertness, ideological warfare, and the preventive repressive interventions created such a political atmosphere that it was very difficult to form one’s own public opinion or to express any kind of solidarity with the Hungarian revolution, and the circumstances were especially unripe for starting a similar revolution*”. (Kaplan 2005, 445)

In fact, many people, typically communist party members, were involved in intensive co-operation between the Czechoslovak and the Hungarian communist party

organs in late 1956 and early 1957. This cooperation was partly made possible by certain communist functionaries that had fled from Hungary and found temporary shelter in Czechoslovakia. Karel Kaplan estimates that the number of these “refugee” communists was considerable amounting to 1367. They were provided for by a commission of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Czechoslovakia, within the operation “Akcia E” framework, and were placed under the protection of three different ministries. (Kaplan 2005, 471)

A special layer of Slovak society were ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia as Czechoslovak citizens, whose number is estimated to some 600.000 in 1956 thus working out some 10% of the whole population of Slovakia. How did these Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia react during the 1956 revolution?

Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia were able to read Hungarian newspapers, at least until the Czechoslovak government introduced a ban on the press from Hungary; after that they were still able to listen directly to the Hungarian broadcast stations – thus were able to directly gather some news, which meant direct knowledge for them, at least in comparison with those Czechs and Slovaks who relied on centrally directed and manipulated Czechoslovak communist press.

Many Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia, who were politically in favour of the revolution, felt very proud of the events. Their sincere feelings of pride and joy and sympathy sprung from their national identity, and was based on the fact that both Hungary and Hungarians, as a brave country and brave people standing up against the mighty Soviet Union, were attributed a very positive picture in the 1956 international press.

A huge outburst of Hungarian national feelings among the Hungarians living in Slovakia was recorded in almost an endless number of secret service reports. In most cases these nationalistic feelings manifested and materialized in symbolic solidarity with the Hungarian revolutionary spirit. This pro-Hungarian enthusiasm also led many men and women to give help to armed insurgents who were fighting against communists. We certainly do not know the exact number of Hungarians living in Slovakia who were keen on supporting the spirit and the idea of the 1956 Hungarian revolution – but it is no doubt that they were the overwhelming majority.

On the other side, there were those Hungarians living in Slovakia who resolutely refused the aims and tendencies of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Some of these people were involved in specific secret operations in order to support János Kádár’s groups.

Many Czechoslovak citizens, including some ethnic Hungarians, faithful Communist Party members, were involved in this cross-border cooperation. The more complete content of this comrade-to-comrade cooperation is still unknown, however, at least one activity of theirs is clear: they smuggled Hungarian language propaganda materials into Hungary, supporting János Kádár’s “consolidation efforts”. (See on this Popély 2016, 73-96)

There were many incidents, as reactions or reflections on the Hungarian events, on a religious basis. Both in the personal recollections as well as in the State Security reports, there are quite a lot of data about incidents where the religious streak is overwritten by national feelings. An almost trivial topos is a group of *incidents*

*about singing the Hungarian national anthem* (if we think of Ferenc Kőlcsey's poem as a sacred text). Many dozens of reports read like the following: "After divine service on November 4, a lady started to sing the Hungarian anthem in the church, after which all the others around her joined in. [M.G. a worker woman, Šárovce/Sáró, Levice District, under surveillance.]" (Kaplan 2005, 546)

From various recorded incidents, one taken from János Sándor's 1956 in Koliňany/Kolon, is particularly complex. We can find here the recollection of Béla Balkó from the village of Koliňany/Kolon next to Nitra. In his recollections he says that in the evening of October 29, 1956, a group of about 10 or 20 people, Slovaks among them, sang the Hungarian anthem in the village inn. As a result, almost all of them were rounded up by the State Security a few days later, four of them were even put on trial and sentenced to many months in jail.

The religious underpinning is indeed unquestionable in many documented incidents; however, it is clear in most cases that it was the singers' national enthusiasm that prevailed (and not the religion as a factor). The evidence for this is not only that the bulk of the anthem-singing incidents took place at secular locations (e.g. at inns) but also that in many cases the non-religious peoples' reactions were dominant even at sacred locations. The two most typical examples we can cite for this are the following: In one case, the State Security stated that "*the miller's wife placed a wreath with a 4-metre-long Hungarian tricolour at the main gate of the cemetery [P.L. Šahy/Ipolytság]*". (Kaplan 2005, 535) Another example is from an oral history collection from Dlhá nad Váhom/Vághosszúfalú in the Galanta District, where "someone wrote on the wall of the parochy [the first line of Sándor Petőfi's National Song]: On your feet, Magyar, the homeland calls..., because of which the wall was not whitewashed for a long time".

According to the State Security reports (*agentúrní správa*) of the time, the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia were more concerned with socio-economic problems (e.g. a possible dissolving of the co-operatives) rather than with Hungarian political matters. Even in relation to the latter, more mention is made of the 1938 re-annexation and matters concerning the displacement of the population than either the topic of religion or of nationality. Contrary to this, we know unfortunately very little about the religious connections of the revolution among ordinary people, such as the Slovakian Catholic Church reacted to Pope Pius XII's related encyclicals. (See Vajda 2007) The question of the free church was a major issue since "Slovakian bishops, as a result of October 23, filed a petition at the end of October 1956 in which they required changing the laws concerning the Church and settling the relationship between the state and the Church, while the bishops referred throughout the petition to the events in Poland and Hungary" (Pešek-Letz 2004, 207).

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