

Katarzyna Trzpiola

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Hungary in 1956 – Remembered in Great Britain

To my astonishment I have to admit that, although there is rather poor knowledge about the history of the Eastern–European countries among ordinary people in London, the 50th anniversaries of Hungarian protest were commemorated here as a really important one: involving few film festivals and exhibitions. I decided to concentrate on the three–part series to mark the uprising in Budapest published in the Guardian.

Each of the parts was dealing with a different aspect of the Hungarian Revolution. The first one, titled: “Political turmoil and street protests: rebellion’s bitter legacy lives on”, was an article based on the interviews made with Hungarians who took part in it. Ian Traynor, who was writing from Budapest, mostly concentrated on the international aspect of the uprising that shook the world half a century ago. He wrote: “the Hungarians were betrayed by the Americans and harmed by the Russians”. “Betrayed” means for him that the Americans, who at the beginning had been encouraging the Hungarians to stand up against the Kremlin, promptly averted their eyes “as the Russians bloodily suppressed the insurgency”. The journalist quoted Mr. Charles Gati, an American–Hungarian historian, who said: “Washington offered only hope, no help. The Eisenhower administration’s policy turned out to be a hoax, hypocrisy mitigated only by self – delusion.” The article was also concentrating on the fact how the past is still dividing Hungarian people. The examples of that are the veterans of the 1956, who are threatening to boycott any commemorative events in which the prime minister is going to take part, vowing not to “breathe the same air” as a politician whose governing socialist party is the successor of the communists who helped the Russians crush the 1956 uprising. On the same time rival political parties and organisations are to stage their own commemorations. To show the tensions between the Hungarians, Traynor uses Pal Germuska’s – a historian at the city’s 1956 Institute – words: “The anniversary should be a chance to make a fresh start at the moment where everyone can agree. Unfortunately no one believes this can happen. The freedom fighters and the killers are still living in this society.

Fifty years is not enough to sort out all these problems (...) Hungary has never been united. Even in the 1956 it was united only for a few moments. (...) This is a big anniversary. And it is a big missed opportunity.”

The second part of the story, written this time by Duncan Campell, was devoted to 20,000 Hungarian refugees who arrived in Britain in the wake of failed and bloody revolution. They were mostly welcomed as heroes. Mr Peter Fargo, one of the interviewed Hungarians, recalling his memories said: “People were incredibly friendly. I think it must be horrible but journalism was very different then and the press was very positive about the migrants. No one made me feel I did not belong here. It was the time of lords Kaldor and Balogh [two Hungarian economists who advised the Wilson government] and we all benefited from the misconception that we were all intellectuals”. Another person said: “People were very sympathetic. The British are always on the side of underdog”, “Students were welcomed into universities – they all wanted to have ‘Hungarian freedom fighters’”. The article put stress on the fact that although many difficulties – like a language barrier, the Hungarian refugees had to face, most of them found their own ways and achieved a great success in Great Britain. The examples are: Mr. Farago who became West End theatre director; Mr. Sarkosi, who went to work for BBC and become a novelist and translator; Joe Bugner became the British heavyweight champion and fought Muhammad Ali for the world title. The poet George Szirtes won last year’s TS Eliot prize or Louis Permyer, a pastry chef, started Louis’ Patisserie, still a Hampstead landmark.

Although all the interviewed Hungarians repeated that Britain was very welcoming, the journalist reveals a funny story that could be an example of some misconceptions or even so-called ignorance from the British people’s side. Mr. Nick Dallman said: “The landlady in my lodging house in Blackburn, Mrs. Gibbs, called me to come to the door one day because there was a Romanian there and she could not understand him. I tried French, German and Hungarian – but he could not understand any of them. Mrs. Gibbs was very puzzled and asked: ‘How can you not understand him – he is a continental?’ I think she thought we all spoke the same language.”

Eventually, the third part focused on the aspect of the Hungarian Revolution that was quite surprising for me; at least I cannot remember discussing it ever at school. It was titled: “How Soviet tanks crushed dreams of British communists”. It was basically the story of the end of the British Communist party. Although the party and its paper – the Daily Worker, during the uprising, was sticking to the official line about ‘counter-revolution’ and ‘fascist activities’ and Jonh Gollan, the general secretary, said: “Imperialism was trying to regain

ground. If the rebels won, it would be a victory for reaction and Hungary would become a fascist base with dagger point at the socialist countries. The Red Army was therefore right to intervene.” But the disquiet was growing among the members. Everything started in February after Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech to the 20th Soviet Communist party congress, that stunned everyone by exposing and condemning Stalin’s crimes and the Hungarian Revolution found out to be a crucial turning point for the party. “The disenchantment was cumulative – the revelations of the secret speech, the manipulation of the democratic process, the lying, the reprimands for breaches of discipline. Hungary, though, was the straw that broke the comrade’s back. It was the decisive moment”, Dorothy Thompson, who left the party, said. The article describes the collapse of the British communism by telling the story of Peter Fryer, the Daily Worker’s reporter who was sent to Hungary that time. “The problem was that Fryer completely contradicted the CP analysis that the uprising was a ‘fascist – reactionary’ attempt to destroy socialism and restore capitalism. Two of his three dispatches were spiked and the third heavily edited. ‘The events in Hungary, far from being a fascist plot, were a revolution by the vast majority of people against the despotic rules of Stalinist bureaucracy’ – Fryer wrote later. The Daily Worker played up reports of communists being beaten to death. Fryer resigned and sent his letter of resignation to the Manchester Guardian.” After that nineteen other Daily Worker’s journalists also resigned.

The article reveals that by January 1957, the CP had lost 9,000 members. The events of late October and November pushed thousands of communists “over the precipice into what became the new left – into Trotskyist group, rightwards to the Labour Party or out of the politics altogether”. Some who kept their faith then saw it tasted again in 1968, when Soviet tanks crushed Czechoslovakia’s ‘Prague Spring’. This article is finished with one of the party ex-member’s quotation: “Hungary was, in some way, the betrayal of everything that we had actively believed in”.

I found this three-part series to mark the uprising in Hungary very interesting and revealing some new views on this historical event that I have never before learned about. It is also important that this story was published in the well-known and powerful source of information in Britain so certainly many people had the opportunity to read it. At the end I would like to quote one more sentence from these articles that I found particularly interesting. It is the definition of the event that shook the world fifty years ago. Joseph Rothschild, the US historian of eastern and central Europe, said:

“These events in Hungary were not a mere rebellion or uprising or insurrection or putsch or general strike, but a genuine and domestic victorious revolution, defeated only by overwhelming foreign force.”

Sources:

The Guardian

1) Ian Traynor, "Political turmoil and street protests: rebellion's bitter legacy lives on", October 19, 2006

2) Duncan Campbell, "Great escapes - how the British welcomed fugitives from the Russian invaders", October 20, 2006

3) Ian Black, "How Soviet tanks crushed dreams of British communists", October 21, 2006

Zitierempfehlung:

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