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The Hungarian Revolution and America's Failure to Actively Respond: Personal View of a U.S.-born Hungarian-American

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[This is the full version of the author's article on 1956 submitted to the September 2006 conference in Budapest on the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. This and a summary version are available on www.americanhungarianfederation.org/publications.htm and www.hungary1956.com/publications.htm]

About the Author

Thomas J. Torda (Ph.D., University of Denver, 1977; e-mail: thomastorda@yahoo.com) is a Northern Virginian independent contract engineer/linguist with 30 years experience in Federal Government-related work, including naval intelligence (since 1997). He has published some 100 articles on defense S&T in Federal Government publications, is the principal author of an October 2000 book-length Fed. Govt. internal report on China's People's Liberation Army, and has also published in non-governmental periodicals—*Theater Journal*, *The Drama Review*, *The Denver Post*, and *Down Syndrome Quarterly*—and at Newsmax.com. Personal statement: I am a U.S.-born (1948) 2nd/3rd-generation Hungarian-American raised with Hungarian culture, including colloquial Hungarian at home (although I did not learn the literary language until college days). My mother was born in Töketerebes (now Trebišov, eastern Slovakia) exactly a century ago, and emigrated to the U.S. in 1911. My father, although U.S.-born (1902), spoke Hungarian at home; his parents were from Kassa (now Košice, eastern Slovakia). I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, which has over 100,000 Hungarians and Hungarian-Americans, the 2nd-largest Hungarian population anywhere, behind only Budapest itself, and a daily newspaper, *Szabadság (Freedom)*. Since heavy professional demands and commitments prevent me from writing the full-length exegesis I would have preferred, I am submitting this 6000-word personal view of one aspect of the Hungarian Revolution, in lieu of a full scholarly paper for the upcoming 50th Anniversary of this revolution. I am not an employee of the Federal Government, and the views expressed are mine.

Introduction

Although I grew up in Cleveland with young Hungarian immigrants who arrived both before and after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, I recall little news of the revolution itself, which seemed to have been drowned out in the U.S. media by news of the Suez Crisis, which was occurring simultaneously. Thus, ironically, my first exposure to the epoch-making events of the revolution was years later, as I watched (on Walter Cronkite's TV program, *The Twentieth Century*) home-made films of *Magyar Szabadságharcok* (Hungarian Freedom Fighters) tossing Molotov cocktails at Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest. Most of the Hungarians I have talked with have expressed disappointment—if not bitterness—about the lack of active U.S. intervention after the U.S. Government and the other Western powers received a formal request for aid from Premier Imre Nagy's government.

Most of the theories I have read on America's failure to actively respond fall into two categories: (1) the Eisenhower Administration was afraid of causing a third world war—especially given the fact that the Korean War had only ended 3 years earlier—over an “isolated” nation, and (2) the U.S. Government was paralyzed by two

simultaneous crises, and could not effectively act in either. Historians at the 50th-anniversary conferences will debate these themes, and much has already been published, especially by Dr. Csaba Békés. The present study is meant only as a personal view. Below, I will simply supply a few factual references needed to set the scene, before expanding on my personal views.

Factual References

U.S. President George W. Bush, in his recent (22 June 2006) remarks in Budapest to the people of Hungary, spoke eloquently when he said,

... Hungary represents the triumph of liberty over tyranny, and America is proud to call Hungary a friend.

... In 1956, the Hungarian people suffered under a communist dictatorship and domination by a foreign power. That fall, the Hungarian people had decided they had had enough and demanded change. From this spot [i.e. Gellert Hill] you could see tens of thousands of students and workers and other Hungarians marching through the streets [on 23 October 1956]. They called for an end to dictatorship, to censorship, and to the secret police [i.e. the ÁVH]. They called for free elections, a free press, and the release of political prisoners. These Hungarian patriots tore down the statue of Joseph Stalin, and defied an empire to proclaim their liberty.

[On 4 November 1956] Twelve days after the Hungarian people stood up for their liberty, the communists in Moscow responded with great brutality. Soon the streets of Budapest were filled with Soviet tanks. The Red Army killed many who resisted, including women and children. The Soviets threw many more into prison. They crushed the Hungarian uprising, but not the Hungarian people's thirst for freedom.

Some 200,000 Hungarians fled into exile in search of liberty. Many found refuge in the United States. These immigrants have contributed to my country in countless ways, and America will always be glad that we opened our doors to Hungarians that were seeking freedom. Fifty years later, the sacrifice of the Hungarian people inspires all who love liberty.¹

What is perhaps most striking about these words is what they do *not* say: they make no mention of the U.S. Government's failure to actively respond to Prime Minister Nagy's call for aid on 1 November 1956. President Eisenhower's offer of economic aid to Hungary, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Henry Cabot Lodge's Security Council proposal that U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld take immediate steps to learn the facts of the Hungarian revolt, the U.S. resolution demanding a Soviet withdrawal from Hungarian territory (voted on by the U.N. Security Council at 3AM on Sunday, 4 November, and vetoed by the Soviet representative), President Eisenhower's urgent note to Soviet Premier Marshal Nikolai Bulganin (the previous four moves detailed below), and Eisenhower's later (December 1956) special legislation to facilitate Hungarian immigration cannot be characterized as active responses.

It is a well-known fact that Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America in the 1950s encouraged resistance to—if not an outright revolt against—Communist oppression. In a 1998 interview with CNN, Hungarian Ambassador to the U.S. Geza Jeszensky, who was 15 years old at the time of the revolution, remarked: "I kept listening to Radio Europe like 10 million Hungarians did. Radio Free Europe certainly encouraged the Hungarians to resist the Soviets. But it was not Radio Free Europe which instigated the Hungarian Revolution. Perhaps the Hungarians were misled, not by the radio, but by the propaganda language by the U.S. administration. It spoke about liberation and rollback. Eisenhower kept speaking about liberation, but as a historian put it, it proved to be only a myth. Liberation was not meant seriously."² Radio Free Europe also had an impact on Premier Bulganin and his Politburo.³

October 23, 1956, the first day of the Hungarian Revolution, saw the events described above by President Bush, as well as the Hungarian Government's reinstatement of Imre Nagy as Premier (he had been deposed by the Soviets the year before). Russian troops invaded Budapest and fighting occurred, but the worst was yet to come.

U.S. President and General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a "report to the people of the Nation on developments in Eastern Europe and the Middle East" delivered from the White House on October 31, 1956, laid out the U.S. stance:

After World War II, the Soviet Union used military force to impose on the nations of Eastern Europe, governments of Soviet choice—servants of Moscow.

It has been consistent U.S. policy—without regard to political party—to seek to end this situation, and to fulfill the wartime pledge of the United Nations that these countries, over-run by wartime armies, would once again know sovereignty and self government.

We could not, of course, carry out this policy by resort to force. Such force would have been contrary both to the best interests of the Eastern European peoples and to the abiding principles of the United Nations. But we did help to keep alive the hope of these peoples for freedom.⁴ [italics added]

The next day, November 1, Radio Free Europe at 1812 hours announced, "The Prime Minister has notified the Soviet Ambassador [i.e. Yuri V. Andropov, future Soviet Premier (1983-1984)] that the Hungarian Government has renounced the Warsaw Treaty and proclaims simultaneously the neutrality of Hungary. It asks the United Nations to protect the neutrality of Hungary and requests the help of the Four Great Powers. At the same time, the Secretary General of the United Nations has been informed of the decisions of the Hungarian Government. It has been asked that the question be put on the agenda of the United Nations Assembly which opens today."⁵ The full text of Premier Nagy's note, as an important historical document, is reproduced in full here:

Reliable reports have reached the Government of the Hungarian People's Republic that further Soviet units are entering into Hungary. The President of the Council of Ministers in his capacity of Minister for Foreign Affairs summoned [Yuri V.] Andropov, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Soviet Union to Hungary, and expressed his strongest protest against the entry of further Soviet troops into Hungary. He demanded the instant and immediate withdrawal of these Soviet forces.

He informed the Soviet Ambassador that the Hungarian Government immediately repudiates the Warsaw Treaty and, at the same time, declares Hungary's neutrality and turns to the United Nations and request the help of the four great powers in defending the country's neutrality. The Government of the Hungarian People's Republic made the declaration of neutrality on November 1, 1956. Therefore I request Your Excellency [i.e. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold] promptly to put on the agenda of the forthcoming General Assembly of the United Nations the question of Hungary's neutrality and the defense of this neutrality by the four great powers.⁶

In a speech in Philadelphia that same day (November 1), President Eisenhower praised the brave Hungarians—just one example being the Hungarian Army troops under Col. Pál Maléter, "who led the heroic defenders of a Budapest barracks [i.e. the Kilián Barracks] in their five-day fight against Soviet tanks"⁷—but left little doubt about the U.S. Government's stance when he remarked,

In Eastern Europe, we have seen the spirit of freedom—swift and strong—strike through the darkness. The peoples of Poland and Hungary, brave as ever through all their history, have offered their lives to live in liberty. And as the people have risen, so have new governments and so has new hope.

In all of this the true intent of the Soviet Union seems not yet clear. We are—only today—troubled by news of new Soviet efforts to suppress the people of Hungary by force. . . .

It is timely to ask how we have practiced our principles at this historic moment.

We have always made clear that we would never renounce our hope and concern for these lands and people.

We have denounced before the world forum of the United Nations the Soviet use of force in its attempt to suppress these peoples' risings. *And we ourselves have abstained from the use of force—knowing it to be contrary both to the interests of these peoples and to the spirit and methods of the United Nations.*⁸ [italics added]

On November 2, Russian troops including tank forces encircled Budapest, and Premier Nagy—besides sending to the Soviet Embassy three notes protesting “the rising Russian threat to this nation ravaged by revolution”—also sent to the U.N. a new plea urging quick action on his request that the U.N. guarantee Hungary's independence. Nagy informed Hammarskjold that the Russians were confiscating railway and signal facilities, and added, “On the basis of this information, the Hungarian government considered it necessary to inform the Soviet Ambassador and all diplomats accredited in Budapest of the steps taken against our people's republic.”⁹

As the situation worsened, the appeals for Western aid became more dramatic. On November 4, that terrible day when 200,000 Soviet troops—some 10-15 divisions, including 4000 tanks—invaded Budapest, Premier Nagy broadcast over Radio Budapest an urgent appeal in which he pleaded, “Soviet troops have opened an attack on Budapest at dawn with the clear intention to overthrow the lawful, Democratic government of the Hungarian people. Our troops are fighting the Soviets for right and freedom. The government is at its place! This we bring to the information of the Hungarian people and the entire world.”¹⁰

What were the U.S. and U.N. responses to these desperate appeals? On November 2, President Eisenhower offered \$20 million in food and medical supplies to the embattled people of Hungary; as announced by Press Secretary James Hagerty, Gen. Eisenhower said, “All America pays tribute in these troubled days to the courage and sacrifice of the Hungarian people in their determination to secure freedom.”¹¹ U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Henry Cabot Lodge, pointing to Premier Nagy's appeal to the U.N. for help to free Hungary from Russian troops, remarked at a Security Council session, “It is plain as it can be that we cannot ignore such a plea,” and proposed that Secretary-General Hammarskjold “engage in a fact-finding mission to ascertain all the facts in the Hungarian situation and report back to the U.N.”¹² At 3AM on Sunday November 4, at an “unprecedented” meeting of the Security Council, Amb. Lodge's U.S. resolution demanding a Soviet withdrawal from Hungarian territory was vetoed by the Soviet representative, forcing Hammarskjold to call an “emergency meeting” of the General Assembly that night; at the night meeting, a U.S. resolution submitted by Amb. Lodge denounced the Soviet Union for “wholesale brutality” in Hungary, and ordered the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet forces from Hungarian territory. The vote was 50-8, with the Soviet bloc casting the 8 negative votes (while 15 nations abstained).¹³ President Eisenhower, in an eleventh-hour move to save the freedom of Hungary, sent an “urgent and personal message” to Soviet Premier Marshal Nikolai Bulganin: “I feel that Western opinion which was so uplifted only a few days ago by the news that the Soviet Union intended to withdraw its forces from Hungary, has now suffered corresponding shock and dismay at the Soviet attack on the people and Government of Hungary.”¹⁴

Finally, at a press conference 10 days later (November 14), President Eisenhower began by saying, with reference to both the Hungarian and the Suez crises, “... [R]eally, for the first time in history[,] an internal machinery, set up by nations for the settlement of internal disputes, is receiving a truly thorough test.

Consequently, everything that we say and do must bear in mind that behind all of these immediately important incidents is a hope and desire of the world that some way can be found to settle disputes around the conference table, not on the battlefield. . . . [T]he last thing we must do is to disturb any of the delicate negotiations now going on under the leadership of Secretary General Hammarskjold [of the United Nations]. We must do nothing that could possibly delay his operations, impede them or hurt them in any way.” After brief personal remarks on Hammarskjold and on the health of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower quickly added,

Nothing, of course, has so disturbed the American people as the events in Hungary. Our hearts have gone out to them and we have done everything it is possible to, in the way of alleviating suffering.

But I must make one thing clear: the United States doesn't now, and never has, advocated open rebellion by an undefended populace against force over which they could not possibly prevail.

We, on the contrary, have always urged that the spirit of freedom be kept alive; that people do not lose hope. But we have never in all the years that I think we have been dealing with problems of this sort urged or argued for any kind of armed revolt which could bring about disaster to our friends.

One critical question at this press conference came from John Herling of Editors Syndicate, who asked, "Mr. President, when the uprisings in Poland and Hungary occurred, Vice President Nixon told an [O]ccidental [C]ollege audience on Oct. 29 in California that this proves the righteousness of the 'liberation position' of the Eisenhower Administration. Now, in view of the latest developments, could you explain, sir, what the liberation position of the Administration is?" Gen. Eisenhower responded,

. . . I believe it would be the most terrible mistake for the free world ever to accept the enslavement of the Eastern European tier of nations as a part of a future world of which we approve.

Now, we have said this in every possible way, and because of this we try to hold out to all the world the conviction that freedom will live, human freedom will live. Now, we have never asked, as I pointed out before, and never believed that, never asked for a people to rise up against a ruthless military force and, for course, we think, on the other hand, that the employment of such force is the negation of all justice and right in the world.

But what I do say is the policy is correct in that we simply insist upon the right of all people to be free to live under governments of their own choosing.¹⁵

Only one point remained to be made: the sobering reality of Hungary's geography. This is a critical point, given America's overly strained resources during the Berlin Crisis of 1948. As Gen. Eisenhower wrote years later in one of his memoirs,

The Hungarian uprising, from its beginning to its bloody suppression, inspired in our nation feelings of sympathy and admiration for the rebels, anger and disgust for their Soviet oppressors. No one shared these feelings more keenly than I; indeed, I still wonder what would have been my recommendation to the Congress and the American people had Hungary been accessible by sea or through the territory of allies who might have agreed to react positively to any attempt to help prevent the tragic fate of the Hungarian people.

Unless the major nations of Europe would, without delay, ally themselves spontaneously with us (an unimaginable prospect), we could do nothing. *Sending United States troops alone into Hungary through hostile or neutral territory would have involved us in general war. Though the General Assembly passed a resolution calling upon the Soviets to withdraw their troops, it was obvious that no mandate for military action could or would be forthcoming. I realized that there was no use going further into this possibility.*¹⁶ [italics added]

Two Selected Viewpoints of Prominent Historians

Gen. Eisenhower's sobering point above is echoed by Dr. Csaba Békés, who writes, ". . . it is most likely that any form of military intervention could have resulted in a direct conflict between the superpowers, from which the outbreak of the third world war would have been just a step ahead."¹⁷

Stephen Ambrose, by many accounts considered the foremost active U.S. historian, buttressed the above themes when he wrote,

But although the United States had anticipated a revolt, and had indeed encouraged it, both through Voice of America and Radio Free Europe broadcasts and through CIA-created underground resistance cells within Eastern Europe, when the revolt actually came, the government had no plans prepared. There was a good reason for this shortcoming—there was nothing the United States could do anyway. As always in grand strategy, geography dictated the options. Hungary was surrounded by Communist states, plus neutral Austria, and had a common border with the Soviet Union. It had no ports. There was almost no trade going on between the United States and the Russians. There was no pressure, in short, save for the amorphous one of world public opinion, that Eisenhower could bring to bear on the Soviets in Hungary. He knew it, had known it all along, which made all the four years of Republican talk about “liberation” so essentially hypocritical.¹⁸

Conclusions and Personal Views

What are the lessons to be learned from the stark realities surrounding the events described above—including the deaths of some 2600 Hungarians and the Soviets’ June 1958 hanging (for “treason”) of Premier Imre Nagy, who had been deposed again on November 4, 1956, in favor of the Soviet choice, János Kádár, and then arrested on November 22, 1956 (after taking refuge in the Yugoslavian Embassy for 2½ weeks). My personal view is that, first of all, President Eisenhower made a grievous error by failing even to airlift supplies to the Hungarian Freedom Fighters. Plans for this contingency had been readied for years, and Gen. Eisenhower—perhaps out of excessive caution, given the simultaneous Suez Crisis—“overruled them.”¹⁹ Beyond this, however, is a much more important point: the U.S. Government failed to live up to its “liberation” philosophy. I am certainly a firm believer in United Nations debate and action, but when Eisenhower chose to rely solely on the U.N. to settle the matter—a noble choice in theory—he ignored the grim reality of the awesome Red Army power, as seen by its invasion of Budapest on November 4. In the days leading up to this tragic event, did Gen. Eisenhower really believe that the Russians would keep their word about withdrawing troops and not send them back? There should be little doubt left that the Republican Party’s “liberation” philosophy was, in fact, nothing more than a sham and a propaganda ploy—and, via the RFE and Voice of America broadcasts, one which let down millions of Hungarians. Especially today, when the U.S. Government puts so much emphasis on spreading democracy and liberation from tyranny throughout the world, U.S. leaders should give serious consideration to the effects their statements on promoting democracy and liberation have in the world community, and to the ultimate price that may have to be paid.

It is all very well to advocate ideals such as liberation and the promotion of democracy in the abstract. These ideals sound good, they strike the right notes, and they address the right audiences, but when such rhetoric meets the reality “on the ground,” the logic of Realpolitik is much more likely to prevail. Already we have seen several examples of such situations. When in 1991-1992 the hard-line Islamist Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria appeared poised to win the general election, Algeria’s military stepped in and scrapped the elections. The West, including the United States, issued only pro forma protests about “fair elections.” On occasion, President Bush has stated his view that the harsh nature, repressive domestic tactics, and pervasive corruption of many Middle Eastern governments, on whose good will our oil supply depends, contribute to the rise of disaffection and radicalization of Muslim youth. However, there has been little if any follow-up to his comments, certainly not in public, thus leaving the impression that such remarks are little more than paying lip service to the right causes.

More recently, there has been a prime example of the application of the old saying: “Be careful what you ask for, you may get it,” where the Administration’s faith that democratic elections are “the answer” was put to the test of reality. In the January, 2006 elections under the Palestinian Authority (PA), the popular winner was none other than the radical organization Hamas, which won on its promises to continue to press the struggle against Israel and to address the issue of rampant corruption in the PA. As is so often the case in real life, there is no “magic bullet,” especially for very complex problems of long standing. Despite the lofty rhetoric, democratic elections by themselves do not immediately and automatically bring peace and harmony to strife-ridden regions that have little or no experience with compromise and consensus-building.

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About AHF: The American Hungarian Federation (AHF), founded in 1906 in Cleveland, Ohio, is the oldest and largest Hungarian American national umbrella organization in the United States. AHF is all volunteer, non-profit, non-partisan, and independent, representing the interests of its member organizations and the Hungarian-American community. Among the oldest ethnic organizations in the US, AHF was established as an association of Hungarian societies, institutions and churches to “defend the interest of Americans of Hungarian origin in the United States.” Over the past 100 years and with the tragic events unfolding in Europe in WWI, WWII, and then again in 1956, AHF's mission broadened to include support of people of Hungarian descent on both sides of the Atlantic and in the successor states in the Carpathian Basin. *The American Hungarian Federation strives to unite the Hungarian-American community through work that supports common goals.*

Fidelissimus ad Mortem!

"Híven Mindhalálig!" - "Faithful Unto Death!"
- Colonel Michael Kovats de Fabriczy,
in his letter to Benjamin Franklin,
Commandant of the Pulaski Legion,
Father of the US Cavalry and fallen
hero in the American Revolution,
died in battle, Charleston, SC, 1779

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