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UNHAPPY ANNIVERSARY: NOVEMBER 4

Collectors of history's ironies can smack their lips. On this 50th anniversary of Hungary's revolution, the heroes the world once celebrated for standing up to communist dictatorship have been eclipsed. Today's democratically elected leaders are the heirs of those who betrayed the revolution by bowing to the Soviet demand to form a new communist government and to hunt down those who had defied the Red Army.

In the early hours of November 4, 1956 as thousands of Soviet tanks rolled into the country to crush all resistance, the rump government of Janos Kadar declared that the revolution, born out of a student march for democracy and independence on the morning of October 23, was a reactionary counter-revolution. Several hundred revolutionaries, many of them under the age of 20, were executed. Two years later, a secret trial condemned to death Imre Nagy, the revolutionary premier who had been a lifelong communist but rebuffed repeated invitations to join Kadar's Soviet-installed regime. In 1958, Nagy was hanged. By the early 1960s Kadar decided that time was ripe for a compromise, summed up by his slogan often cited but never used in public: "Whoever is not against us is with us."

In the years that followed, the self-described "realists" who accepted "the immutable fact of Soviet rule" over Hungary instituted "a soft dictatorship." In conversations with Westerners, they called Hungary "the happiest barracks in the Soviet camp" and the Western press adopted the phrase.

One third of the old anti-communist coalition, grateful for a rise in living standards and a loose form of censorship, dropped its opposition. Another one third retreated into glum silence though by the 1970s a new generation of dissenters emerged. But what happened to the final one third is the most painful to relate: They became informers. In the years since the tumbling of the Berlin Wall, scores of respectable public figures have been exposed as having succumbed to the threats and blandishments by the secret police. They acknowledged having reported regularly on friends and colleagues. Oscar-winning film director Istvan Szabo is one example -- tragic because he said he'd do it again. He claimed that his objective was to save a friend's life -- as if one could negotiate with the secret police.

The communist elite has never lost its grip on power, and it outmaneuvered its opposition in three elections since the tumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The communist party which has kept changing its name from its inception this time reinvented itself as the Socialist Party, and it won recognition as a Eurostyle social democratic party. It has attracted new recruits, some of them descendants of the prewar ruling classes, touted as trophies of the party's broad appeal.

A high point of the Socialist campaign came in 2002, when the party chose as its standardbearer a non-party economist, Peter Medgyessy, who had acknowledged having been agent D-209 of the Hungarian intelligence service while under KGB control. His successor, the current prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany who won in the elections this past spring, is a tycoon in Hungarian terms whose wealth comes from the controversial privatization campaign that began in 1989. (Critics say: Who but the communists had money to buy the companies that had been nationalized by their predecessors in the late 1940s?)

Gyurcsany made history earlier this year by publicly acknowledging that he and his party lied “morning, evening and night,” especially about the budget, and he “did nothing” to rescue the economy from slipping into bankruptcy. His lies resembled the Enron model of book-keeping. When the public reacted with indignation and thousands of people of all political stripes except the Socialists demanded his resignation (even the President of the Republic advised him to step down), he defended himself by saying that every politician lies but others lack the courage to acknowledge their lies – as if all liars and lies were equal.

Gyurcsany is now imposing drastic austerity measures that he claims will save the country from economic collapse. Few people outside his party have confidence in him.

On October 23 this year, the streets of Budapest were filled with demonstrators and riot police. Heads were bashed and scores of people arrested. Some of them were from the far right. But the great majority of the tens of thousands of protesters were acting in the spirit of October 23, 1956, demanding an end to a regime that lives by lies.

Perhaps rebellion is a folly of youth. But October 23, 1956 was a magical day that made a nation young. It was the finest hour of Hungarian history, even if it failed to usher in the end of communism as the revolutionaries had hoped. What followed November 4, 1956 was not the advent of reason and maturity. It was only after a reign of terror that the Kadar regime felt confident enough to begin to endorse some of the reforms that the revolutionaries had demanded. But the communists remained in power.

On this unhappy anniversary, the sobering fact is that the October 23 revolution did not win, despite what the beneficiaries of the November 4 Soviet invasion have been saying, and others repeat because the quip sounds smart and it soothes many a guilty conscience. It's time to take a deep breath and acknowledge that the men of November 4 won. At least for the moment.

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