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The Unsuccessful Hungarian Revolution of 1956

In 1956, the people in Hungary rose up against Stalin-influenced leaders in an attempt to improve their quality of life socially and economically, demand civil liberties, and maintain the integrity of their nation’s culture. Although this particular revolution was unsuccessful in ridding Hungary’s borders of Soviet influence, the processes that led to the violent outburst of dissent from the people have been of particular interest to revolutionary scholars. Sociologist John Foran presents a theory of Third World revolutions that can be extrapolated to the Hungarian revolution. His theory claims that five inter-related causal factors (dependent development; a repressive, exclusionary state; the elaboration of an effective and powerful political culture of resistance; economic downturn; and a world-systemic opening) must come together in order for a Third-World revolution to be successful. In light of Hungary’s failed revolution, it is clear that one or more of Foran’s factors of a successful revolution did not take place in the process of the 1956 revolution. More specifically, despite Hungary’s revolution showing elements of dependent development, a repressive state, and the elaboration of an effective and powerful political culture of resistance, the revolution’s lack of an economic downturn or a world systemic opening caused Hungary’s insurgents to fail.

Dependent development of a Third World country’s social and economic structure is the first factor of Foran’s theory of revolution. Since the world is a very inter-connected machine that relies on international relationships and trade, the upbringings of developing countries are “products of the complex intermeshing of internal and external developmental dynamics” (Foran 18). This dependence on external forces for growth typically impacts the country’s economy most directly. Foran expands on this idea and explains the consequences of external involvement in a developing country’s economy: “at certain moments in their history, [third world economies] do undergo both rapid development combined with the negative consequences of this process in the form of such problems as inflation, debt, growing inequality, or overburdened housing and educational infrastructures, among many social ills” (19). Such historical economic patterns–Third World dependencies on other, more economically powerful countries–greatly influence the specific social structure of the developing country. Thus, a large range of sectors of the population are affected by the economic and social grievances that are produced by dependent development. As a consequence, Foran argues that dependent development, economically and therefore socially, is the “principle cause of the grievances of the classes and groups that participate in revolutionary coalitions” (19).

Just as Foran theorizes, external influences played a key role in forging the economic and social structure of pre-revolutionary Hungary. From the very initial establishments of post-World War II Hungary, Soviet forces influenced the projection of the country’s development. Hungary was virtually passed from one dominating power to the next as Soviet troops drove Nazi Germany out of Hungary at the tail end of WWII. Now a satellite nation under Soviet influence, Hungarian communists stepped into the shoes of the old establishment and attempted to claim legitimacy. Despite the communists’ long-standing tendency toward social and economic reforms, however, their passive role in pre-war revisionism handicapped their immediate influence (Kovrig 50). Consequently, many of the primary reforms that the Soviet-loyal Hungarian Prime Minister, Matyas Rakosi, instituted were ill-received.

Rakosi, upon the demand of Stalin, began his time as Prime Minister with the implementation of a Soviet system of economy. One of the key facets of this system was increased industrialization–mainly in the heavy industries such as oil, mining, shipbuilding, steel, chemicals, machinery manufacturing–and industrial decentralization. Though it deeply affected Hungary’s economy, this drive for increased industrialization was meant to chiefly benefit the mother country ruled by Stalin as he accumulated materials to defend against the threat of the West. Specifically in Hungary, Rakosi implemented an economic program called the Five-Year Plan aimed to increase investment and industrial production. Included in this plan was a move toward the collectivization of farmland conjectured with coercive tactics, high delivery quotas of materials to be sent to Moscow, unstable income flows, and the persecution of the “rich peasant” class called the kulaks. While the Five-Year Plan had some benefits such as a rise in national income and increased state employment, the negative effects on Hungary far outweighed the positives. Since the increased growth rate was achieved by disproportionate investment in heavy industries, other sectors of the economy such as the light industries, handicraft trades, and agriculture were stagnated. In fact, there was an actual 18% *drop* in the real incomes of individual workers and employers due to the application of the Five-Year Plan (Kovrig).

This Soviet model of intensive socialization was not specific to Hungary, but affected Hungary much differently than other countries. The Stalinist collectivization tactics were indiscriminately implemented in all the Eastern European satellite states. However, since Hungary was poor in raw materials, this type of development proved particularly unsuitable in the country. The ideological preconceptions of the communist elite in power and its mania for following the Soviet practice that was clearly unfit for Hungary, regardless of environmental differences, therefore made the eventual collectivization of the dissatisfied people inevitable.

Foran further theorizes that the reproduction of such a social and economic structure requires a repressive, exclusionary, and personalist state in order to maintain control over a rapidly changing and largely dissatisfied population. This is the second factor of his theory of revolution. With such a state, the lower classes and resistance to the state are repressed and both the middle and economic elite are excluded from political participation. Additionally, while a strict and repressive state is “good at guaranteeing order, at least for some time, they also tend to exacerbate conflictual relations between state and society” (Foran 18). These conflictual relations are rooted in the dissatisfaction of the masses caused by dependent development and the state, as Foran describes it, thereby “provides a solid target for social movements from below . . . and facilitating the formation of a broad multi-class alliance against [said] state” (18).

In the case of Hungary, the magnitude of the state’s relative repressiveness and exclusion of the population from political participation fluctuated throughout the years leading up to the eventual outbreak of revolution in 1956. When Soviets first established their influence on the internal government of Hungary post-WWII, repression of old, potentially threatening groups of the population was strong. For example, the “old elites had been in the main antinazi and anticommunist camps, and consequently, they bore the brunt of both German and Soviet purges; executions, deportations, and immigration virtually eliminated these classes from the Hungarian social structure” (Kovrig 55).

The Prime Minister Rakosi was especially infamous for his extreme tactics of eliminating his political enemies. When a 1945 secret ballot election resulted in the Communist Party having only 70 out of 409 seats in parliament, it was clear that the Communist Party had no chance of gaining power by democratic means (Kovrig 59). In response, Rakosi destroyed his political opponents by “cutting them off by salami,” adopting similar tactics of execution and deportations as well as using the violent force of his secret police (the AVO). The incompatibility between the basic consensual values and those of the communist elite necessitated such draconian measures when the period of intensive development began in 1948. With this, gradually, the communists consolidated their power and in 1949 and Hungary had officially become the People’s Republic of Hungary with Rakosi at its helm (BBC). Once the Communist Party and the state became one, the Kremlin could implement its political directives unimpeded. Increasing pressures from the Soviets, “either direct or by the intermediation of the Communist Party, placed severe restraints on the freedom of the post-1945 governments to pursue Hungarian interests” (Kovrig 56). This fact was accentuated by Rakosi’s adamant adherence to Stalinist policies, and led to the brutal Prime Minister’s nickname of “Stalin’s best pupil” (Colley).

However, because of the extremely repressive Rakosi rule and his implementation of Soviet programs, an overwhelming majority of the population was politically uninvolved and the people grew increasingly uneasy with the government. “The process of integration into the Stalinist system did not have the consensual support of Hungarian society and did not bring material benefits commensurate with the sacrifices that the economic planners had demanded” (Kovrig). Once Stalin died in March of 1953, the Soviet politburo replaced Rakosi with Imre Nagy, a progressive minded but Soviet loyal Hungarian, in order to quell some of the masses’ unrest. Nagy himself stated, “Rakosi . . . brought socialist reorganization of agriculture to a dead end, bankrupted the agricultural production, destroyed the peasant-worker alliance, undermined the power of the People’s Democracy, trampled the rule of law, debased people's’ living standards, established a rift in between the masses and the Party and the government . . . in other words swept the country towards catastrophe” (94). Consequently, as Prime Minister, Nagy’s most important task of his new economic policy was to be a “substantial all-around reduction in accordance with the capabilities of the country,” shifting from Rakosi-Stalinist policies of heavy industry bolstering to emphasizing light industries and winding up collective farms. With Nagy’s radical departure from Rakosi repressionary policies, the Soviet leaders hoped to preserve political stability in Hungary. Under Nagy, life for the masses in Hungary improved; good appeared in shops and political prisoners that were brutally punished under Rakosi were released. Nagy therefore had the support of the masses. However, eventually, the Kremlin grew suspicious of Nagy popularity and his progressive reforms of Stalinist policies and reappointed Rakosi as Prime Minister.

However, when Rakosi returned to his pseudo-dictatorial position of power, the remnants of Nagy’s reforms remained within the party. There was now an erosion of unity in the government and Rakosi’s freedom of action was curtailed by his political opponents that Nagy had brought back into power. The leader of intra-Party revisionism was Imre Nagy, and his expulsion from the party lead him to take a firmer stand against the party orthodoxy and expressed an indirect condemnation of Soviet hegemony throughout Eastern Europe. The return of Rakosi was met with popular unsatisfactory as he tried to stifle more aggressively the more vocal opposition. This back and forth between Rakosi’s harsh, borderline authoritarian policies and the forward thinking, anti-Stalinist moves made by Nagy continues throughout the greater accumulation of public discontent and mobilization.

The third factor of Foran’s successful Third World revolution is the elaboration of effective and powerful political structures of resistance. With this, broad segments of the population from disparate sectors must be able to mobilize their own force and coalesce with others in order to create an effective unified opposition. Usually this revolutionary political culture is fostered by shared lived experience, emotions, cultural idioms, organization capacity, and ideology. How well such a culture can bring together diverse parts of the population, Foran argues, could spell the success or doom of a movement.

This revolutionary culture that Foran describes was certainly present in Hungary immediately prior to the break out of revolution. However, this sentiment of revolution was slow to germinate in much of the population. When Rakosi came into power post-WWII, his poor economic policies of intense socialization sparked much unrest throughout the working classes and agricultural peasantry especially; these groups simultaneously felt alienated by the exclusive political environment that limited their control of the future of the country and the oppressive costs of socialization in terms of individual liberties. Additionally, as Rakosi attempted to force Hungary into the Stalinist-mold of increased industry and homogeneous “pan-soviet” culture, most Hungarians felt that their leaders were utterly subservient to Soviet Moscow and neglectful of the real needs and wants of the nation. This “total lack of benefits made any popular identification with the Soviet system unlikely” (Kovrig 78). However, an absence of popular ideological motivation or sense of participation meant that, “despite a high flow of symbolic outputs in the form of parades mass rallies and the exhortative propaganda, the overwhelming majority of the population remained alienated and unconvinced of the regime’s legitimacy” (Kovrig 71).

The intelligentsia was, surprisingly, one of the main and primary groups to first start mobilizing against Rakosi’s regime. Traditionally, they had been motivated by opportunism and often endorsed the excesses of Stalinism. However, once progressive Nagy replaced Rakosi after much agricultural and industrial dissatisfaction, the intelligentsia were granted a significantly greater amount of freedom; for example, newspapers and other publications were more widely circulated. When Nagy was eventually disempowered, the reinstated Rakosi quickly tried to stifle these voices by censoring and banning certain noncommunist works and purging the media of noncommunist sentiments. Such infringements on their recently obtained freedom led the intelligentsia to think that the “despotic, anti-democratic methods of leadership in the cultural field more and more intolerable” (Kovrig 107). “The vacillation of the Hungarian government caused a *crise de conscience* in the intelligentsia and led them to increasingly adopt more radical forms of revisionism” (107). Writers now demanded cultural freedom and for a realistic “appraisal of the plight of the masses pointed to a painful but definite emancipation from the bonds of ideology, even though in practical terms they aimed no further than the replacement of Rakosi with Nagy” (109). Rakosi’s continued censorship and the unwarranted harsh treatment of Nagy caused the public to take note of their admittedly equivocal hostility to the party and to follow their battle with growing enthusiasm.

The group that responded most excitedly to the intelligentsia was the university students. After years of heavy indoctrination of the educational system under Rakosi, students were still able to recognize the stark difference between theory and reality in the condition and position of the Hungarian people; “this perception in turn produced a cynicism” that lead to many students standing with writers and other intelligentsia. The Petofi Circle, a forum for dissent, was the catalyst for the student-intelligentsia alliance. Often, meetings turned into mass protests in opposition of the repressive Soviet-happy Hungarian government under Rakosi. This forum, just as Foran theorized, was one of the main organizational networks that helped bring together the initial segments of the population to mobilize.

Soon, it became clear that the majority of the public was very much so opposed to the Soviet communist rule of Hungary. Critics of the Stalin-era regime demanded civil liberties, impartial justice, economic efficiency, and implementation of the social ideas of socialism. In an election following the yet another brutal and unpopular Prime Minister, every single Communist Party member was defeated, demonstrating that the totality of party control was broken (111). The leading role in this process of disintegration of Communist power gradually passed from revisionist writers and intelligentsia to students and other extra-party elements just as workers; unions adopted a resolution demanding more autonomy and welfare for workers. This progressive disaffection within party circles and the more gradual articulation of popular discontent was a manifestation of “the myth of the party as a monolithic body with an unimpeachable ideology being destroyed by the rise of revisionism. The consequent division in the elite proved to be a major catalytic factor in the collapse of the entire system. The momentary alliance between the previously irreconcilable elements (the alienated masses and the increasingly secular revisionist intelligence) and the concurrent atrophy of passivity of the system’s regulative organs left the orthodox leadership without an adequate basis for support at the critical moment of open revolt” (114).

The most prominent element of Foran’s revolutionary culture in the Hungarian revolution was that of shared culture. Once a peaceful demonstration of students and workers in Budapest turned violent as AVO police shot into the crowd, the revolution officially began. Hungarian army units dispatched to the protest earlier remained passive or joined the insurgents, making it evident the regime’s support had dwindled to only the secret police and the Soviet military. The bloodshed during this protest sparked a nationalistic spirit of solidarity among Hungarians that “reduced any voluntary return to any society tutelage or to purely communist rule” (118). Only when the demands of the opposition were brutally denied and when the foreign army shot down workers and students did such a strong national consciousness blaze up (Jordan 3). With this nationalistic drive, the nature of the uprising struck a responsive chord in all socioeconomic groups; a survey showed that the proportion of the active (fighting) revolutionaries were: 14% of professionals, 2% of white-collar workers, 13% of industrial workers, 6% of peasants, and 20% of students and other groups (Kovrig 61). In addition, the institution of worker’s councils and revolutionary committees and the semi-autonomous insurgent units within the revolution brought into play a wider-cross-section of society such as marginalized peoples during the Rakosi reign and opportunists adventurers. This diverse make-up of the population of insurgents demonstrates the successful application of Foran’s theory of political revolutionary culture.

The absence of the last two factors of Foran’s theory of revolution, a sudden economic downturn and a world-systemic opening, in the Hungarian revolution explains the failure of the opposition’s efforts. Foran claims that almost all successful revolutions are proceeded by a sudden and drastic economic downturn, usually caused internal contradictions of dependent development or by external forces and shocks (Foran 18). Hungary experienced a gradual economic downturn in response to Rakosi’s strict application of the Soviet system of collectivization and industrialization. However, this gradual economic downturn was not a critical turning point for the outcome of revolution. Instead, it was an essential factor of the process of coalescing broad segments of the population leading up to the breakout of revolution.

Additionally, the lack of a world-systemic opening, a let-up of external controls that may add crisis to the state and create an opportunity for the activity of revolutions, in the Hungarian revolution was a very important detriment to the opposition. Despite Nagy making a speech to the United Nations exposing the ill-treatment of the Hungarian people as well as calling on Western powers for help, there were too many international distractions for the Western powers to take a stand with Hungary. The Hungarian revolution coincided with the Suez Crisis in Egypt, causing Britain and France to ignore the pleas from Nagy. The United States additionally was in the middle of a presidential election, focusing their efforts on domestic issues rather than international revolutions. With the Soviet Union watching over Hungary, the United States was also hesitant to provide any aid to the Hungarian revolutionaries because of the potential for full-out war with the Soviets. Because these main Western powers were distracted at the time of the Hungarian revolution, no foreign aid could promote the opposition’s cause. On top of this, communist countries like the People’s Republic of China were pressuring the Soviet Union to keep a close eye on their satellite states and maintain control. Because of these external factors and the consequential lack of a world-systemic opening, the Hungarian revolution was unable to succeed and popular uprising was soon squashed by the arrival of Soviet tanks in Budapest.

In sum, the Hungarian revolution demonstrated a failure of the Stalinist period’s efforts to overcome nationalistic forces and to create an all-encompassing pan-soviet culture. Although the Hungarian resistance against Rakosi and Soviet influence failed to evict Soviets completely from the nation’s boarders, the opposition did succeed in disempowering Prime Minister Rakosi and his forced implementation of an ill-fitting Stalinist economic system. Additionally, while the decisions in Hungary were made ultimately by the Soviet mother nation, a new consultation process replaced the draconian tactics of the Rakosi socialistic period. In accordance with Foran’s theory of revolution, the process which the Hungarian revolution came about adhered to the first three factors of a successful revolution which he lays out: dependent development, a repressive state, and the elaboration of an effective and powerful political culture of resistance. However, due to the lack of an economic downturn and a world-systemic opening, the final two factors of a revolution were absent in the 1956 revolution.

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