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**Paul Lendvai: One Day That Shook the Communist World**

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## Introduction

One of the most perceptive, if also the most controversial, observers of events before and during the Hungarian revolution of 23 October to 4 November 1956 was Leslie B. Bain, the American journalist of Hungarian extraction. In his 1960 book on Eastern Europe, he wrote: “No event in recent history has been so much lied about, distorted, and besmirched as the Hungarian Revolution.”<sup>1</sup>

These words are a very apposite description of the reports and the long-standing debates about the dramatic events that, due mainly to the Kádár regime’s disinformation propaganda, have been partly obscured and partly presented in a blatantly deceptive light. The numerous books and studies published prior to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet system in 1989–1991 by Hungarian expatriates and Western historians about the course and consequences of the uprising and the national war of independence could rectify the facts and analyze the motives behind the decisions in Hungary and abroad only to some extent, because the most important documents held in the secret archives in Budapest, and above all in Moscow, were inaccessible to them.

The fact that today we can present by and large reliable conclusions about the fifty-year-old drama and its global consequences is due primarily to the efforts of the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, established in Budapest in 1991. Two Hungarian historians, the recently deceased founding director György Litván and János M. Rainer, his successor since 1999, together with their colleagues, have published numerous studies and research papers on the events leading up to the revolution, as well as on its course and its aftermath (admittedly predominantly in Hungarian). It is only thanks to their commentaries and supplements that we can now properly classify and check the veracity of the document collections compiled from the former Soviet archives by Russian historians in 1993 and 1996. The exceptional significance of the three handbooks published in 1996 by the Institute on the Chronology,

the Bibliography and Retribution and Recollection, as well as the two-volume biographies of Imre Nagy (by János M. Rainer) and János Kádár (by Tibor Huszár), cannot be overestimated.<sup>2</sup>

Even fifty years after the event, the Hungarian people's uprising, revolution, and freedom fight still attract surprisingly keen interest in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (as well as in other countries), but by no means only within the ranks of the older generation. Yet in spite of the memory of the world-historical significance of the Hungarian Revolution, the course and background of those events are only sketchily known, probably due primarily to the language barrier.

Although I have only briefly described the revolution of 1956 both in my memoirs and in my book on Hungary's history, the triumph and tragedy of the Hungarian uprising have had, as in the case of so many of my compatriots, a crucially formative influence on my life in a multitude of ways. Even though I left Hungary for good on 13 January 1957, I was able, in the midst of events at the Kilián Barracks, to experience in the flesh how world history was being made and the desire for freedom brutally stifled by a foreign army. Contemporary witnesses could not, of course, perceive the background. Still, up to this day the sense of "having been there," namely the direct personal experience, does play a unique role. I was closely acquainted with some of the key personalities of Imre Nagy's circle, such as Miklós Gimes, executed in 1958, and Miklós Vásárhelyi, sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but also with some of the important political and economic spokespersons of the long-lasting Kádár regime. Thanks to the particularly close relationship prevailing between Hungary and Austria, I was able, during the seventies and eighties—albeit consistently monitored and spied on—to report on Hungary for the *Financial Times* as well as for Austrian, Swiss, and German papers and later on in my capacity as editor in chief and director of Austrian television (ORF). Thus I also had the opportunity by way of many private conversations, encounters, and experiences in Hungary personally to observe the phases of the much-discussed amnesia, the "collective repression," as the psychologist Ferenc Mérei, who was sentenced to ten years in prison in 1959, put it.

This special personal background made me decide to write in depth about those great topics—uprising and revolution, freedom fight and

oppression, reprisal and submission—which have kept me under their spell for some fifty years. It is this framework into which the analysis of such complex personalities as of Imre Nagy and János Kádár fits, as well as the dialectic between heroism and treason symbolized by their contrasting roles. The attitude of public opinion then and now is yet another fascinating chapter in contemporary Hungarian history.

Even though there are still some gaps in our knowledge owing to the closed archives of the State Security Service and the Interior and Defense Ministries in Moscow and to some extent in Budapest, on the basis of the currently available sources, we can shed light on such previously fiercely disputed questions as the responsibility for the “cry for help” to the Soviet Union; the siege and capture of the Radio Building by the insurgents; the background of the first Soviet military intervention; the delay and the turnaround in the attitude of Imre Nagy; the “disappearance” of Kádár and his attitude before and after the second Soviet intervention; the zigzag course taken in the Kremlin; the controversial broadcasts by the U.S. radio station Radio Free Europe in Munich and the American aloofness during and after the revolution; the duplicity and betrayal by the Tito regime of the group around Nagy during the three-week asylum in the Yugoslav Embassy; and, finally, the role played by Kádár in the trial of Nagy and his associates.

Above and beyond documents and personal impressions, I was also able to draw for my research for this work on interviews carried out in Moscow with the former head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov; the long-serving Soviet expert on Hungary and until the end of 2005 Russian ambassador in Budapest, Valeri Musatov; the former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger (with the assistance of the ORF office in Washington); as well as prominent Hungarian personages, such as Árpád Göncz (president, 1990–2000); member of Parliament Imre Mécs; the recently deceased poet Istvan Eörsi; the widow of General Pál Maléter, Judit Gyenes; the former chairperson of the Federation of Political Prisoners, Jenő Fónay; and Ödön Pongrácz, one of the legendary brothers (who is still fostering the tradition of the Corvinists in his museum).

The Hungarian Revolution was the greatest challenge to Soviet hegemony in post–World War II Eastern Europe and at the same time a widely visible symbol of the bankruptcy of Soviet-style socialism. It was

an international event, which to this day has engendered a profoundly positive image of Hungary in the eyes of the world. It was a “victorious defeat,”<sup>3</sup> an authentic “anti-totalitarian”<sup>4</sup> revolution, and perhaps above all a “fantastic story.”<sup>5</sup> It is a paradox, yet true: The ethical significance of this Revolution of Hopelessness has been, and is, better perceived and more appreciated abroad than in Hungary.