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Fall of Communism in Hungary

Abstract: In 1956, Hungary's communist leadership, under Imre Nagy, attempted to introduce multi-party elections and remove Hungary from the Soviet sphere of influence. This move did not go over well with the Soviets. They quickly removed Nagy from power, replacing him with hardliner Janos Kadar. Kadar was able to maintain a stable communist regime for more than 3 decades, until 1988. After Soviet reformer Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power, reform minded communists in Hungary became increasingly prominent. In 1989, they succeeded in organizing a National roundtable with opposition groups within Hungary and free elections were held in late 1989. Hungary's communists were handedly defeated. 1990 officially marked the end of communism as Jozsef Antall took power as the first non-communist leader in Hungary in over 40 years.

Keywords: *Hungary, mass movement, student demonstration, defeat of the democratic movement, 1956-1990, the communist regime of Janos Kadar, free elections, late 1989, Jozsef Antall.*

In October 1956, Hungary was one of the first states to attempt to step out from behind the Iron Curtain when a student demonstration evolved into a mass-movement which forced the Soviets to replace the hardline Hungarian leader with a more liberal, reform oriented prime minister. Initially, this reform minded communist leader, Imre Nagy, enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union as he took steps to democratize the nation. In his few weeks of power, Nagy took steps to introduce a pluralistic government, and announced that he was going to remove Hungary from the Warsaw Pact and instead be a neutral power. This announcement was one reform too far for the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, and he ordered Soviet tanks to be sent into Hungary to crush the attempted revolution. On November 4, 1956, Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest and crushed the nascent democratic movement, removed Nagy from power and installed the hardliner Janos Kadar as the new Hungarian Prime Minister. As a result of the invasion, around 2000 died and upwards of 200,000 people fled Hungary. Imre Nagy and other reform minded communists were tried and executed in 1958, denounced for their role in the Revolution. Any hope of a democratic movement in Hungary was lost as long as Kadar remained in power. (History.com "Soviets End Hungarian Revolution") (newworldencyclopedia, "Hungarian Revolution of 1956") (Bandow, "Hungarian Revolution and Freedom")

Under Janos Kadar, Hungarians lived relatively good lives. In order to prevent a repeat of the 1956 revolution, Kadar implemented something he referred to as "goulash communism." "Goulash communism" consisted of policies which sought to create a high quality of living and also consisted of economic reforms intended to encourage consumerism. In addition to these reforms, Kadar allowed Hungarians mostly unrestricted international travel and relative

autonomy, allowing Hungarians to be influenced by Western ideas and ideals. His attitude toward dissent in Hungary was simply “who is not against us is with us”, and the Hungarian government began serving its citizens rather than commanding them. Kadar’s implementation of goulash communism allowed the Hungarian people to experience a much higher standard of living than was seen in the rest of the Warsaw Pact, and his regime faced little opposition until the late 1980s as a result. (newworldencyclopedia, “Janos Kadar”) (Nyysönen, “Salami Reconstructed”) (Gelter, “Goulash”)

Beginning in the 1980s, it became evident that Kadar’s economic policies intended to encourage consumerism and revitalize Hungary’s economy had failed. As a result of this failure and the huge debts Kadar incurred in order to run his welfare programs, Hungary’s economy was in ruins. As debts mounted, Hungarians began experiencing rising cost of food and other goods, leading to rising discontent among the populace. The ability of the Hungarians to travel to nations such as Austria further this discontent, as the Hungarian people began comparing their luxuries with those of Austria and began to realize that living in a capitalistic society may be more beneficial than living in a communist one. (Cienciala, “Lecture 19a”)

In 1985, Hungarian dissidents began to be visible, and groups in opposition to the government began to form. By 1988, 22 political groups, and many opposition movements had been formed. At the same time this discontent within Hungary was brewing, a different type of communist leader would rise to power in the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev became the Soviet Premier in 1988 and quickly set out on a path of reforms meant to help the economies of the Eastern bloc while allowing them to catch up to the Western nation’s technological developments. In addition to economic reforms, Gorbachev also launched a series of reforms meant to open up and liberalize Russian/communist society, and he began relaxing harsh policies such as censorship. (Cienciala, Lecture 19b)

Gorbachev’s reforms would have a huge impact on Hungary and the fate of its communist regime. His new liberal and economic policies would find a lot of support among the Hungarian populace and younger members of the communist party, who began to call for reforms to Hungarian politics. In 1988, the reform-minded faction within Hungary’s communist party succeeded in pressuring Kadar to retire as Prime Minister, instead giving him the powerless title of Party President while Karoly Grosz became the new Hungarian Prime Minister and General Secretary of the Party on May 22, 1988. In addition to this changing of power, many of the older communists in Hungary who supported Kadar were replaced with younger communists who supported reforms. Grosz immediately attempted to pass reforms which aimed to revitalize the economy and liberalize the nation, however he refused to implement a multi-party system. Grosz’s refusal to implement total political reform caused him to face many challenges from the reform faction within the communist party, primarily from Imre Pozsgay, a reformer who was supported by Gorbachev. (Cienciala, 19b) (Goodman, “Chronology”)

Shortly after Grosz’s rise to power, events began transpiring that would spell the end for communism in Hungary. On June 30, 1988, support for political reform in Hungary became so strong that Grosz appointed Pozsgay as the Minister of State, with special powers for political development. Shortly after, on September 3, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, an opposition group advocating for political reforms and a multi-party system, was formed. As support for radical political reform spread throughout Hungary, Grosz began losing his grasp on power, and on November 24, Miklos Nemeth, a reformer who advocated for a free market economy, would

replace Grosz as Prime Minister, although Grosz would remain in power as Party Leader. (Goodman)

Once Nemeth became Prime Minister, communism in Hungary was on its last legs. In January 1989, the Hungarian parliament passed a law granting people the right to demonstrate freely and to form associations independent of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, provided that the groups register with the government. On February 8, Hungarians received very good news when Gorbachev's advisor, Oleg Bogomolov, stated that "Moscow could accept a neutral Hungary modeled after Austria or Sweden." The Hungarian communist party responded to this announcement quickly, and on February 11, the Central Committee approved the creation of independent political parties and agreed to shift to a multi-party system. On March 15, upwards of 80,000 Hungarians marched through Budapest during a national holiday. Throughout the day, rallies were held by various opposition parties who called for free elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Shortly after this rally, Grosz traveled to Moscow. He would return to Hungary on March 29, and he announced that Gorbachev had agreed to not interfere with the political reforms in Hungary and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc. (Goodman) (Bruszt, "Negotiated Revolution")

Shortly after Grosz's return from Moscow, on April 3 the communist party announced that it would conduct roundtable discussions with 7 opposition groups, including the Hungarian Democratic Forum, which would begin in June. Even before the roundtable negotiations began, the reforming communists in Hungary began to take steps to assert Hungarian independence from the Soviet bloc. On February 14, 1989, the communist party officially announced that they would be removing the communist star from Hungary's flag. On May 2, Hungary removed the barbed wire from its border with Austria, allowing free travel between the two nations and allowing many East Germans to flee across the border to eventually settle in West Germany. On May 21, the reformist faction within the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party issued a statement calling for Hungarian neutrality and calling for immediate talks between the Hungarian government and opposition groups. Hungary's leaders also tried to deal with the legacy of the 1956 Revolution, with Imre Pozsgay claiming that the Revolution was a "popular uprising" rather than a counter-revolution. Pozsgay also took steps to rehabilitate Nagy and the other Hungarians executed for their roles in the revolution, and Nagy and 4 of his aides would be exhumed from their unmarked graves in order to receive lavish state funerals. (Goodman) (Pelinka, "Decisive Transition but a Revolution?") (Bruszt) (Siekierski, "In Memoriam")

On June 13, a little over a week after Solidarity won a decisive electoral victory over the Polish communists, discussions between the Hungarian communist government and opposition parties would finally begin, with the goal of establishing free elections. The Hungarian communist government was now led by a four-man Presidium, consisting of General Secretary Karoly Grosz, party Chairman Rezso Nyers, Premier Miklos Nemeth, and Minister of the Interior Imre Pozsgay. While Grosz was rather conservative, Nyers, Nemeth, and Pozsgay were all heavily in favor of reforms. In total, 50 chief delegates and around 500 experts met in Budapest over the course of the discussions. (Bruszt) (Goodman) (Grosz, "Interview with Party Presidium")

The roundtable discussions between the communists and opposition parties would last until September. Over the course of the discussions, the opposition groups had grown more popular

both domestically and abroad, especially when, in July 1989, US President George Bush traveled to Hungary to meet with the leaders of the opposition parties. On September 18, the National Roundtable, as the opposition groups referred to themselves, announced that they had finalized negotiations with the communist government. The opposition groups announced that they had agreed to a Presidential election held by the Legislature, and free elections the following year. Backlash from the Alliance of Free Democrats regarding the president being selected by the Legislature led to a referendum in which the people voted that the President should be elected by popular vote. (Goodman) (Bruszt) (Cienciala)

The end of the negotiations with the opposition sealed the fate of the communist party in Hungary. Shortly after the negotiations were finished, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party held a congress. On October 7, an overwhelming majority of the delegates present at the congress voted to dissolve the Workers' Party and to instead establish the Hungarian Socialist Party, which was committed to a free market and democratic elections. On October 18, the Hungarian parliament abolished the Hungarian People's Republic and approved a new constitution for the Republic of Hungary, officially changing the country's name and establishing a power presidential position. An ally of Pozsgay, Matyas Szuros, served as acting president until elections were held. On October 19, the communists confirmed that multi-party parliamentary elections were to be held by June 1990, and on October 23, Szuros officially declared Hungary an independent democratic republic. (Goodman) (Cienciala) (Bruszt)

In the elections that followed, the communists would not even attempt to hold onto any seats in parliament. The communists allowed totally free elections, unlike in Poland, of 386 Parliamentary seats. The reform minded communists, led by Pozsgay, had hoped that by allowing negotiations and free elections they may enjoy relative popularity among the populace and experience some success in the election however, in the 1990 election, the communists were swept away. The Hungarian Socialist Party won the fourth highest number of seats, only 33, while the Hungarian Democratic Forum won the largest amount at 164 and the leader of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, Jozsef Antall would go on to become the first non-communist, democratically elected leader of Hungary in over 40 years. (Bruszt) (Goodman)

Due to Hungary's communist party reforming itself into the Hungarian Socialist Party, the party is still active in Hungarian politics. This situation is rather unique as many former communist regimes in other Eastern bloc nations lost all of their influence following the fall of communism. This emphasizes the main difference between the end of communism in Hungary compared to the end of communism in other Eastern bloc nations: in Hungary, communism was ended from the top down, rather than being forcefully overthrown by a revolution. As a result of the communists reforming themselves out of existence, they are able to hold some sway in Hungarian politics even today.

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