HUNGARY: THE YEAR OF DISILLUSIONMENT

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From the People’s Revolution to the “Happiest Barracks”

On October 23, 1956, in Budapest, a demonstration by students demanding free elections and protesting against the regime developed into an armed revolution, with broad swathes of the population joining in. That same night, the Politbüro appointed Communist reformist Imre Nagy prime minister, but at the same time called for assistance from Soviet troops. In the short term, Nagy got the situation under control; the Soviets withdrew. However, on November 4, the Soviets invaded Hungary again, this time to overthrow the Nagy government.

Afterward, Moscow installed a regime of collaborators led by Nagy’s comrade-in-arms Janos Kádár. The uprising was quashed; Kádár’s justice system had hundreds of revolutionaries executed, among them Imre Nagy. Around 200,000 Hungarians left their homeland. Nonetheless, after years of such retribution for the uprising, Kádár started to allow reforms and relaxations within the system. Hungary became the “most liberal” country in Moscow’s sphere of influence—it was known as “Goulash Communism,” or wryly as the “happiest barracks in the camp.” On January 1, 1968, the “New Economic Mechanism” was introduced in Hungary, but, after the suppression of the Prague Spring in August of that year, in which Hungarian troops were also involved, it could hardly be implemented as planned.

In Hungary, where I live, the most significant event of 1968 was the invasion of Prague, which units of the Hungarian People’s Army were involved in. I was nine years old at the time. My own personal memories are clearly distinct from what I would later learn about these sociopolitical events.

From mid-August of that year, I was at a Pioneer camp—a camp of the party-based youth organization—in northern Hungary near the border. On the last Sunday before returning home, my school’s soccer team played against the local technical training school, suffering a defeat. During this (for us) shameful game, we watched military convoys moving along the highway. They resembled the military
parades that streamed by Budapest’s City Park, but this was no parade. In a quickly arranged political lesson, we were informed that it was friendly international assistance.

**Silence about the invasion**

As we made our way home, I saw women of the village standing along its main street with alarm on their faces. One was even crying; she said her son had been taken off to war. Once home, I announced that war had broken out but that it was, in fact, friendly international assistance, and that one woman’s son had already been pressed into service. At this, the adults in my family also seemed alarmed, or rather, afraid. They whispered in my ear that I dare not speak of such things, because then they too would be taken away. When I asked what it was that I must not speak about, they only replied that merely discussing what one should or should not discuss could get one taken away.

For me, 1968 was, independent of the friendly international assistance and this brief interlude, the year the world turned dark and serious, the year things took a quick and powerful turn for the worse. An incident in my family at that time brought home to me that the protection and emotional security a family offers could vanish in a single moment. I got a taste of being at the mercy of my surroundings; I now had to understand that good was bad, bad was good, and that both were strictly forbidden: in a word, I came face to face with obligation and compulsion. What began for me in 1968 was what bad lawyers use to exonerate criminals in court: a “difficult childhood.” Or perhaps it would be better to put it this way: my childhood ended in that year, a little earlier than it should have. All of this remains clearly distinct from what I perceive today, as a writer, citizen, and thinking person, about the aftermath of 1968.
After 1968, years of stagnation and isolation followed in Hungary. The economic reforms initiated shortly before that year were now suspended. Advocates of these reforms were ousted from their posts, overthrown, or intimidated. In the arts, particularly in literature and music, censorship, which had been relatively mild in the preceding years, now became oppressive. The press, on a short leash, now occupied itself with the typical pseudo-debates, at the same time revealing symptoms of deceitfulness and collective intellectual decline. Official control of scholarship, particularly in the social sciences, became extremely strict. Centers of sociological study that had become more active in the 1960s were shut down; scholars in philosophy, psychology, history, and literary studies found themselves under direct state control.

Although there was no wholesale liquidation of the cultural elite as in Czechoslovakia, the apparatus of the Ministry of the Interior and the party managed to expel a great many outstanding scientists and artists from the country in the decade that followed 1968. At least as many more committed suicide under the burden of their maladjustment or hopeless prospects. Many would become alcoholics, and many became marginalized. The greatest number, though, were those who abandoned their moral compass, or simply adapted to the narrow-mindedness and drab mediocrity of the regime.

Society under the guardianship of the state

I reflect on all of this, simultaneously aware of the undeniable fact that after 1968, in the mature years of the Kádár regime, order, tranquility, and even moderate prosperity prevailed. Yet all of these things, which cause many to think back with nostalgia on this period, went hand in hand with a paralysis of society, with its citizens subjected to the guardianship of the state. The decade in the wake of 1968 was not malicious, bloody, and brutal like Stalin’s terror, but merely malicious, mendacious, and moronic. This was only heightened by the ingratiating ideology of the “happiest barracks.” On the one hand, this ideology conveyed a cynical scorn for the Soviet occupiers and their other colonies in the region (because our misery was made to seem like prosperity and freedom in comparison to their greater misery); on the other hand, it contained an unspoken threat: this could all get worse—much worse, in fact, if the party leadership should so decide.

At the same time, 1968 was the year of disillusionment. Young intellectuals who, in the ferment of the 1960s, had thought that
the communist dictatorship could be reformed, could be gradually improved, were now forced to cast off their illusions. Those of sound mind and moral sensibility could no longer believe that what we had was anything but “true socialism,” or that what “existed in reality” could be improved and given a “human face.” Such delusions lost all credibility at one stroke. The devastating realization dawned on these intellectuals that this was indeed true socialism, and that it was rotten from the core.

Wary of ideologies

Whoever joined “the party” before 1968 (“the party” as it was the only one: the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party) might even have been an honorable person though perhaps a bit too naïve or optimistic. After 1968, however, such a person was either blind or a devoted careerist. Then the next great cathartic realization came: that scholarly thought, and indeed philosophy itself, could be conceived of without Marxism. Just as the cultural elite of the time dropped Marxism in an instant, the Marxist utopia was flushed from Bolshevik ideology, too. All that remained was the raw exercise of power. Next, a few important questions gradually began to be raised. Like this one: in the absence of freedom in the political and public spheres, could one eke out a small corner of intellectual freedom?

I feel this to be the most significant positive legacy of 1968, one that still survives today: the freedom from illusion, the wariness of ideologies, and the striving for intellectual freedom. Whether the reflexes of solidarity that have imbued this positive legacy of 1968 will survive in some form, or merely become objects for the archeological study of intellectual history in a few decades’ time, I am, unfortunately, unable to predict.

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