

“Imre Nagy and the Unsettled Past: The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Hungary”

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The vast majority is dumbfounded, and not because they have heard the results of an academic research from the Historical Subcommittee, but because they feel that a pillar of the institutionalized political system is about to be uprooted. Party members feel that our political system is somehow based on 1956. And now they have the impression that this foundation is being removed from underneath.

Mihály Jassó, Meeting of the MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers Party) January 31, 1989¹

This was Mihály Jassó's reaction to an interview that Imre Poszgay, Minister Without Portfolio, made on the Hungarian radio program *168 hours*. Poszgay had described the 1956 Revolution as a popular uprising then at variance with the official State interpretation that had branded the event a counter-revolution.² As it turned out Jassó's fears were well founded.

On June 16, 1958 Imre Nagy, who had been the Prime Minister of Hungary during the ill fated Revolution of 1956, was put to death by the Soviet backed regime of János Kádár and buried in an unmarked grave. Thirty-one years later, in a spectacular reversal of fortune, the communist regime was de-legitimized by the funeral and reburial of Nagy. Well over 300,000 Hungarians attended the ceremony, and collectively demonstrated their power to resist the tyranny of occupation and made plain their desire for an autonomous state.

The size of the crowd and the fiery speeches of the day can be misleading, however. The great political transformation that took place in Hungary of 1989 was marked by negotiation and is more akin to a process of reform than the tumultuous Hungarian Revolutions of 1956 or 1848. And yet, the negotiations and politics of 1989 were set in the context of 1956, and ultimately it was the Hungarian people's accord with the goals of the Revolution that provided the opposition parties with the legitimacy to negotiate from a point of strength. A violent eruption would have been to no one's interest, and in a national referendum held on November 26, 1989 the Hungarian people overwhelmingly affirmed their commitment to a democratic state

¹A Compendium of Declassified Documents and Chronology of Events (hereafter: A Compendium of Declassified Documents), Csaba Békés, Malcom Byrne ed., Political Transition in Hungary 1989-1990 International Conference Budapest, Hungary, 1999 sponsored by the National Security Archive/ Cold War History Research Center/ 1956 Institute.

² See: Imre Poszgay, *1989: Politikus-pálya a pártállamban és a rendszerváltásban* (Budapest: Püski, 1993) 94-95, 224 and Joshua Foa Dienstag's fine article entitled, "The Poszgay Affair: Historical Memory and Political Legitimacy," *History and Memory* (Spring/Summer 1996).

With sovereignty assured, however, the seeming unity displayed at the funeral quickly disintegrated in the wake of a fierce dispute that publicly emerged between the various political factions in regard to Nagy's place in Hungarian history and encapsulated by the 1996 parliamentary debate over a bill making him a martyr of the nation. This paper will examine the memorialization of Nagy and the subsequent debate over his contested memory and place in Hungarian history.³

The interpretation of national symbols is intimately interwoven with power politics in Hungary as they are used as guideposts to specific points of memory utilized by all political factions in their bid for political legitimacy.⁴ It is in this sense that I use the concept of memory culture in order to better understand the interplay between national symbols, the contested history espoused by the various political factions vying for power in Hungary, popular interpretation, and legitimacy.

The funeral of Imre Nagy represented the culmination of a long-term strategy of protest in which the concept of *kegyelet* was linked to the legitimacy of the state. *Kegyelet* is synonymous with Emile Durkheim's concept of piacular rites and is defined as duty toward the dead.⁵ Hungarians often use the analogy of Antigone's obligation to her brother in describing how powerfully this value operates in Hungarian society. *Kegyeleti* ritual reinforces that value in order to interpret the historical context of the present through the remembrance of the past. Hungary is a composite of ethnic and religious identities bounded by language and traditions such as *kegyelet*.⁶

The historian Istvan Rev claims that "the history of Hungary is one of battles lost, the normal public rituals are therefore funerals and burials rather victory parades."⁷ As funerals and memorials are part of the bedrock of Hungarian identity, political relationship to these heroes is fundamental to political legitimacy in Hungary.

Memory culture in Hungary is reinforced throughout the year through personal memorial such as Day of the Dead, when cemeteries become living cities as graves are cleaned and prayers are offered up in remembrance of forebears. The political connection between personal funeral ritual and the state is made explicit in national public rituals that mimic the very personal remembrance that is the essence of *kegyeleti* ritual. Memorialization of national heroes has a long tradition in Hungarian politics. Funerals in the wake of the failed Revolution of 1848 served to fortify Hungarian nationalism. The return of the remains of the 1848 Revolutionary Lajos Kossuth in 1894 from Turin, Italy was marked

³ Ideas for this paper stem from two previous studies by the author "The Funeral of Imre Nagy: Contested History and the Power of Memory Culture," *History and Memory*, 12, 2 (Fall/Winter, 2000) and "Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation: Contested Memory and Social Cohesion," *East European Quarterly*, 36, 2 (Summer, 2002).

⁴ See Clifford Geertz and his extension of the sociologist Max Weber's concept of *verstehen* in his work *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1983) 122-23, 142-146.

⁵ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York, 1965) 446.

⁶ Péter Hanák, "A nemzeti identitás konstrukciója" (The structure of national identity), *Európai Szemle* 3 (October, 1997): 66-67.

⁷ István Rév, "Parallel Autopsies," *Representations*, no. 49 (Winter 1995): 31.

by a funeral accompanied by three days of public mourning.⁸ According to historian Alice Freifeld the return and eventual internment of Ferenc Rákóczi II, leader of the failed Rákóczi rebellion, 1704-1711, was linked to the romanticized myth of the nation surrounding Kossuth and 1848. Public sentiment was such that Emperor Franz Joseph rescinded a law that had declared “Rákóczi a traitor and (by extension) accepted the political cult of an anti-Hapsburg rebel.”⁹ The stories of national resistance in the face of failure continue in the contemporary period, although now connected to the success of the Republic of Hungary. For example, on October 6, 1997 I observed school children commemorating the Eternal Light Memorial of Lajos Batthyány, Prime Minister during the short lived Hungarian Republic 1848-1849, on the anniversary of his execution by the Austrians in 1849. On the same day that Batthyány was executed 13 Hungarian generals were executed in the city of Arad (now in Romania). The generals are known as the *Aradi Vértanu* (blood witnesses of Arad).

The potential volatility of state funerals can be exemplified by the funeral of Laszlo Rajk on October 6, 1956. Rajk had been the Minister of the Interior in the Stalinist regime of Mátyás Rákosi, and had the unfortunate privilege of being the first victim of Rákosi’s show trials in 1949. The accession to power by the Soviet backed Hungarian Communist Party in 1948 was marked by a brutality that affected well over 500,000 Hungarians who suffered arrest, interrogation, forced relocation, imprisonment or execution. Under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, Hungary embarked on a series of disastrous economic policies that had, by the time of Stalin’s death in 1953, brought Hungary to the brink of economic ruin.¹⁰ The instability caused by his policies led to his Soviet backed ouster in July of 1956. In an attempt to assuage the Hungarian people’s dissatisfaction with the brutality and economic disaster associated with Rákosi, the new government under Ernő Gerő staged his rehabilitation through a public funeral. The attempt backfired and served to underscore the sentiment of national resistance. According to the historian Gyorgy Litvan, the funeral was a “dress rehearsal” for the Hungarian Revolution. The newspaper *Szabad Nép* reported, “...there has not been such a funeral since that of Lajos Kossuth” and that “...the Hungarian people are filled with grief and a burning hate (towards the perpetrators of the crimes).”¹¹ Similar to Nagy’s funeral the ceremony was an explicit critique of the communist regime, whose legitimacy was based on the backing of the Soviet Union. Over 200,000 Hungarians attended the funeral and foreshadowed their power to confer political legitimacy on a government that would assure their sovereignty, a point amply demonstrated on October 23 of that year. The critical difference between the two funerals is that in 1989 an energized population expressed this power at the polls rather than at the barricades. Interestingly, Rajk who had been one of the more radical Stalinists had become a martyr linked to the demands for sovereignty and democratic goals associated with the Revolution of 1956.

⁸ John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988) 120.

⁹ Alice Freifeld, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848-1914* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 288.

¹⁰ George Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 93, 101.

¹¹ *Szabad Nép*, October 7, 1956, p.1-2.

Imre Nagy was and remains a contested figure in Hungarian politics. As a national communist who felt that the way to a socialist utopia for Hungary could only be found through the institutions authentic to Hungarian society he was anathema to those communists who professed belief in the “universal man” and the Soviet path to socialism. He was twice expelled from the Hungarian communist party and more than likely was compromised by the KGB to inform on fellow Hungarians living in Moscow during his first banishment prior to WW II.¹² His eulogy to Joseph Stalin attests to his ability to survive the tumultuous Rákosi years.¹³

It was his interest in Hungarian agricultural reform and nationalism that endeared him to anti-Stalinist reformers within the Hungarian communist party.¹⁴ His reforms during his first term as Prime Minister 1953-1955, which included an ending of the terror that had been enacted by the Hungarian Stalinists, made him the focus of the student’s demands prior to the 1956 Revolution that he be restored to the post of Prime Minister.¹⁵

Nagy had been ousted from his post and office following the resurgence of the Stalinist faction in the Hungarian communist party in April of 1955. In the emergency of the events leading up to the Revolution, Nagy was idealized by the students and transformed into a Revolutionary hero embodying the demands of liberty and sovereignty more akin to Revolutionaries of 1848 than the Imre Nagy who was not particularly interested in political pluralism.¹⁶

Nagy who again became the Prime Minister of Hungary on October 24, 1956, with the backing of the Soviets, had demanded that the Revolutionaries lay down their weapons. Nagy’s decision not to request Soviet assistance or demand that Hungarian security forces put down the Revolution are factors that allowed him to maintain legitimacy with the Hungarian people in the streets. These eventually would be the same factors that would turn the Soviets and conservative members of the Hungarian communist party against him.¹⁷ Nagy only gradually joined with the goals of the revolution. For example,

¹² János M. Rainer, interview by author, 6 April 1998.

¹³ István Rév, “Covering History,” Getty Conference, Hamburg, Germany, 1977.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of Nagy’s agricultural policies and political philosophy consult János M. Rainer’s multi volume biography of Imre Nagy entitled, *Nagy Imre: Politikai életrajz. vol. 1* (Budapest: 1956 Intézet, 1996).

¹⁵ See György Litván, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1996), 48 and Bill Lomax, *Hungarian Worker Councils in 1956* (Highland Lakes: Columbia University Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁶ Nagy’s idealization by the University Student Organization, MEFESZ, founded at József Atilla University in Szeged, Hungary is discussed by Charles Gati, “From Liberation to Revolution, 1945-1956,” *A History of Hungary*, ed. Peter F. Sugar, Péter Hanák, Tibor Frank (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 378 and in Litván’s, *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, 52-57. For a discussion of student radicalism see Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Possible Effects of Student Activism on International Politics,” *Students in Revolt*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset, Philip G. Altbach (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), 498.

¹⁷ Gzeregorosz Ekiert, *The State Against Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 57.

it was only on October 30, 1956 that Nagy announced the creation of a multiparty system urging Hungarians to “safeguard the achievements of the revolution.”¹⁸

The power of Nagy’s symbolic status was well recognized by the communist regime in 1958 as attested by their decision to bury Nagy under the scaffold where he had been hanged at the Gyujtofogház prison in Budapest. Later, as with other Revolutionaries condemned to death, his body was taken to Plot 301 in the Budapest Municipal Cemetery and buried in an unmarked grave.¹⁹ Relatives were not informed where the bodies of their loved ones were buried and attempts to locate and commemorate the site were thwarted by the police guarding the site. Only depressions in the overgrown plot revealed the location where bodies lay.²⁰ The graves were “guarded” from commemoration, as were sites associated with the memory of the 1848 and 1956 Revolutions. Monuments erected to heroes of the 1848 Revolution such as the Polish national General Bem and Petoffi had served as gathering points for students on October 23, 1956.

Political scientist Grzegorz Ekiert explains the paradox of Kádár’s legitimacy after the 1956 Revolution in his book *The State Against Society*. Ekiert asserts that the popular revolution enacted in Hungary in 1956 destroyed the communist institutions of governance and explicitly rejected the legitimacy of the former Stalinist regime. After the revolution was crushed, János Kádár, who was backed by the Soviet army, had to destroy the opposition to his authority and create a distance between himself and the Stalinists who had been deposed during the revolution. In June 1957 Kádár asserted, “Although Rákosi and Nagy are not in the country at present, they still have followers in our party...they are both opposed to the present party leadership... This is why we must safeguard the party’s unity with fire and sword...”²¹ By imposing a reign of terror, Kádár was able to eliminate his most dangerous enemies, Nagy among them, and set a clear example of his ability to wield power.²² It was only after Kádár had used the Stalinists to help him consolidate power that they were purged from the government in 1960.²³ With his opponents effectively removed from power, Kádár was able to fashion political institutions that reflected his famous dictum, “those who are not against us are with us.” Providing the Hungarian population access to material goods, relative freedom of movement and a certain degree of *laissez-faire* in regard to matters of the home, Kádár remained in full control of political power while appearing to be lenient in regard to local autonomy.²⁴ In exchange for these concessions, the Hungarian people “publicly forgot”

¹⁸ “Proclamation by Imre Nagy on the Creation of a Multi-Party System, October 30, 1956,” Csaba Békés, Malcolm Byrne, János M. Rainer ed., *The 1956 Revolution: A History in Documents* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002) 290-291.

¹⁹ János M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre 1953-1958: Politikai Életrajz*, Volume II, 436.

²⁰ Béla Kövér, “301-es parcella köztemető,” *Magyar Nemzet*, May 3, 1989, p. 21.

²¹ János Kádár “Reply to the Discussion at the National Conference of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party,” June 29, 1957 found in *János Kádár: Selected Speeches and Interviews*, Robert Maxwell, M.C. ed., (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985) 195-196.

²² This resulted in the execution of approximately 341 revolutionaries, the emigration of over 200,000, and the incarceration of 22,000 Hungarians. Békés et. al., *The 1956 Revolution: A History in Documents*, 375.

²³ According to the historian Bill Lomax, Kádár was dependent on the Stalinists as they had often been “the only people willing to serve his regime.” Lomax, “Hungary: The Quest for Legitimacy,” *Eastern Europe: Crisis and Legitimation*, ed., Paul G. Lewis (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984) 86.

²⁴ Ekiert, *State Against Society*, 109.

the events of 1956.²⁵ Kádár could be seen as an advocate for the Hungarian people against the more conservative economic policies of the Soviet Premier, Leonid Brezhnev, who followed Khrushchev into power after the former fell from grace. Stability had followed Kádár's terror and a feeling of well being was provided by setting the Hungarian standard of living in contrast to the other client states of the Warsaw Pact.²⁶

The urgency of a souring economy in the early 1980's coupled with Mikhail Gorbachev's new policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* contributed to a split between conservatives and reformers within the Communist Party. Reformers believed that only an introduction of democratic reforms paired with economic liberalization could save the Hungarian economy. The worsening of conditions ultimately led to the ouster of János Kádár and many of his associates at the Party Conference in May of 1988. Recognizing the symbolic power of Nagy and the Revolution a subcommittee of the Central Committee was formed to investigate the Revolution under the leadership of Ivan Berend.²⁷ According to the historian Csaba Békés, the urgency with which Gorbachev wished to hasten reform led to an abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, announcing in June of 1988 that, "any nation had the right to choose its own social economic system."²⁸ These factors emboldened a host of opposition parties to emerge and challenge the regime such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in September of 1987, Federation of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) in March of 1988, and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) in November of 1988.²⁹ As mentioned earlier, breaking the taboo regarding public discussion of the legitimacy of 1956 became one of the key tools used by the opposition to undermine the State. Among the most important voices of the opposition was the Committee for Historical Justice, a coalition of opposition groups founded on June 5, 1988, that along with the families of the deceased, advocated for a reexamination of 1956 and the reburial of Nagy and the other martyrs. Both the reform faction within the government and the opposition would lay claim to Imre Nagy and the legacy of 1956.

The reform communists attempt to utilize 1956 was complicated by the regime's negative interpretation of the event. For example, on the thirtieth anniversary of the Revolution in 1986 János Berecz, the central committee's secretary for ideological affairs organized a major media campaign that continued to portray the 1956 Revolution as a counterrevolution and its supporters, including Nagy, were smeared as fascists and imperialists.³⁰ This same official state interpretation could be found in textbooks at all

²⁵ János Kis discusses this tradeoff known as the "pact of forgetting" in his book, *Politics in Hungary: for a Democratic Alternative* (Highland Lakes: Columbia University Press, 1989).

²⁶ Ekiert, *State Against Society*, 113-115.

²⁷ Poszgay, 1989: *Politikus-pálya*, 91.

²⁸ Csaba Békés, "Back to Europe: The International Background of the Political Transition in Hungary, 1988-1990," András Bozóki ed., *The Roundtable Talks of 1989: The Genesis of Hungarian Democracy* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002) 242-245.

²⁹ András Bozóki, "Hungary's Road to Systemic Change," Béla K. Király ed., *Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-1994* (Highland Lakes: Columbia University Press, 1995) 62 and Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe*, 211.

³⁰ See János Berecz, *Counter Revolution in Hungary: Words and Weapons* (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1986) and Rudolph Tökés, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 241.

educational levels through 1989.³¹ The states' negative portrayal of Nagy and his fellow revolutionaries helped enliven the heroic status of Nagy and the legitimacy of the Revolution among many Hungarians. This, in turn, provided the opposition with a symbolic locus for dissent.³² For example, on the thirtieth anniversary of Nagy's execution on June 16, 1988 a poignant protest organized by the Committee for Historical Justice took place at plot 301 where the graves and their contents were acknowledged.³³ Protests took place later that day at the Batthyany Eternal Light Memorial and the Hungarian Television station, where the names of the martyrs were read out loud, these demonstrations were forcibly broken up by police.³⁴ As the political situation deteriorated for the conservative faction, the demand for a proper reburial of Nagy and his compatriots became a demand for a public reburial.

Imre Pozsgay's startling announcement in January of 1989 affected not only those within the Central Committee, but the Hungarian public as well. If the 1956 Revolution was a popular uprising, on what grounds had Nagy and the revolutionaries been executed? The announcement strengthened the hand of both the reformers within the government and the opposition groups outside of the government.

The communists had originally wanted to negotiate with the various opposition groups separately, hoping to initiate democratic political change that would leave them in a position of power.³⁵ The pressure against the regime continued to mount with articles and books that re-examined the Kadar years and what had happened to Nagy and his compatriots. The potential power of the Hungarian people was demonstrated on March 15, the national day commemorating the start of the 1848 Revolution, when hundreds of thousands of Hungarians joined the opposition parties in the streets for rallies in Budapest. The Hungarian people were energized by the event and affirmed the legitimacy of the opposition demands, a point not lost on those in power. The Opposition Roundtable was founded on March 22, 1989 in order to negotiate the transition to democracy with the government. The strength of the opposition can be seen in their demand that the negotiations had to be carried out with the Roundtable as a whole and not in separate discussions between the government and the various opposition factions.³⁶

The split within the communist party continued to widen as to the interpretation of 1956 and progress toward instituting democratic change. Karoly Grosz, General Secretary of the MSZMP epitomized the paradox regarding the events of 1956 and establishment of a

³¹ For example see, Ágota Szirtes Jóvárné, *Történelem IV* (History 4) Dolgozók Középiskola részére (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1987) 534.

³² Imre Mécés recognized the importance of Plot 301 as a form of protest early on. Mécés himself a revolutionary originally condemned to death had been pardoned as part of a general amnesty in 1963 claimed that he began visiting Plot 301 after his release from prison. Imre Mécés, interview by author, November 7, 1997.

³³ *June 16th, 1988*. Budapest: Black Box, 1988. Videocassette.

³⁴ Virág Kedvelő (flower lover), "A Nap Története," *Demokrata* (1988) and the Police report found in János Kenedi's, *Kis Állambiztinsági Olvasókönyv* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1996) 213.

³⁵ For example, see Imre Pozsgay's comments regarding power and negotiations with the opposition. Meeting of the MSZMP Political Committee, February 7, 1989 and Zoltán Ripp, "Unity and Division: The Opposition Roundtable and Its Relationship to the communist Party," *The Roundtable Talks of 1989*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

democratic system. In a meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Karoly Grosz, Gorbachev reaffirmed that Hungarians were free to settle their own internal affairs, but both he and Grosz concluded that no historical revision was needed in regard to the official Hungarian state interpretation of 1956.³⁷

In March of 1989 the bodies of Imre Nagy and his colleagues were exhumed from Plot 301 and prepared for reburial. On May 25, 1989 an agreement between the Committee for Historical Justice and the government had been signed for a public funeral to be held at the Heroes Square in Budapest. The minutes of the Political Committee of the MSZMP on May 16 and May 29, 1989 reveal the explicit connection between the demands for Nagy's reburial and the Party's legitimacy. The regime would have to face the past and attempt to align itself with the demands of the opposition. In the context of a discussion about an official statement on Nagy and 1956, György Fejti, a member of the MSZMP Central Committee, asserted, "...we are dealing not only with June 16 but with October 23."³⁸ He continued, in spite of political differences all parties were committed to a spirit of reconciliation and therefore, "...mistakes should be revealed...the sooner we say it the smaller the damage."³⁹

The Funeral

The construction of the Heroes Square was begun in honor of the celebration of the millennium of the Hungarian kingdom in 1896.⁴⁰ Dominating the square is a statue group portraying Árpád and the other six leaders of the seven Hungarian tribes entering the Carpathian basin. A grave to the unknown soldier was placed in front of the statue group in the center of the square. Directly behind the central statue group is a semi circular pavilion that displays the pantheon of Hungarian kings and heroes. Thus a national sacred space was created appropriate for important national rituals and most importantly for the June 16th, 1989 memorialization of its heroes.⁴¹

Throughout the day Hungarians streamed to the ceremony. By the end of the funeral service there was literally a mountain of flowers in front of the caskets. Nagy's casket was decorated with the symbol of the 1956 Revolution, a Hungarian flag with symbol of the communist regime torn out of the center. The power of the opposition can be seen in its ability to have forced the regime to allow a public funeral of Imre Nagy. It was then up to the Hungarian people to decide whether to legitimate the ceremony or not.

³⁷ According to Gorbachev, "Democracy is much needed, and the interests have to be harmonized. The limit, however, is the safekeeping of socialism and assurance of stability." Memorandum of Conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and Károly Grósz General Secretary of the Hungarian socialist Workers Party, Moscow, 23-24 March, 1989, A Compendium of Declassified Documents.

³⁸ The anniversary of the start of the 1956 Revolution coincided with the day the republic of Hungary would come into being.

³⁹ Meeting of the MSZMP Political Committee May 26, 1989.

⁴⁰ András Gerö, *Modern Hungarian Society in the Making: The Unfinished Experience* (Budapest: Central European Press, 1995), 203.

⁴¹ Alice Freifeld makes the point that the "Millennium Exhibition remained in Hungarian historical consciousness as a monument to past greatness." *Nationalism and the Crowd*, 277.

Hungarians filed past the coffins in an uninterrupted flow from the beginning of the ceremony to the end broken only by the official wreathing ceremonies at 11:00 A.M. Individuals and families were provided with enough space as they approached the caskets in order to pay proper respects. In some cases individuals were overcome with grief and had to be helped away by family members and friends. By the end of the ceremonies at Heroes Square the flowers equaled the height of the platform erected for the display of the coffins and speaker's lectern, and as the hearses left with the coffins for the burial ceremony flowers were strewn in the path of the vehicles.⁴²

The speeches were electric in their explicit demands for Hungarian national sovereignty and democratic governance. Imre Mécs, condemned to death during the terror for his role in the revolution and now a leader of the Free Democrats, called for an accounting of those who were responsible for the years of authoritarian governance asking, "How could you [Hungarians] live without freedom for thirty three years?"⁴³ Using the excerpts from the Hungarian National Verse written by the fiery 1848 revolutionary Sándor Petöfi, the crowd promised that "they would not be held captives anymore" when Mécs demanded that they promise to Imre Nagy that they would save the achievements of the Revolution.⁴⁴

Sándor Rácz, the Union Leader of the Budapest Workers Council, who spent seven years in prison for his participation in the Revolution attacked both the Hungarian communist regime and the Soviet Union. He listed the obstacles to Hungarian sovereignty. "These are: The presence of Soviet troops. These coffins and our bitter lives are the result of Russian troops on our territory. Let's help the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from Hungary as soon as possible. The Communist party still clings fearfully to power. What it could not achieve in the past forty-four years it cannot achieve now. They are responsible for the past, they are responsible for the damaged lives of Hungarians."⁴⁵ Rácz concluded his speech with a Roman Catholic hymn that calls on the Virgin Mary to protect Hungary. The film made by *Black Box* showed Hungarians on the street singing the hymn as they listened to it over the radio.

Perhaps the most impassioned speech of the day was given by Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister 1998-1992, representing the Young Democrats. János M. Rainer, an Hungarian historian and dissident, claimed that the crowd that day consisted of a large number of young people and that Orbán connected to them in a way the older speakers couldn't.⁴⁶ Orbán asserted that the young people in the crowd had come not only to honor Nagy, but to mourn for a future taken away by the Hungarian communist party, "the bankrupt state that has been placed upon our shoulders is a result of the suppression of our revolution..."⁴⁷ He ripped into the reform communists stating, "We cannot understand that those who were eager to slander the Revolution and its prime minister, have

⁴² See *June 16th, 1989*. Produced by Dér-Pesty. Budapest: Black Box, 1989. Videocassette and *Imre Nagy's Life and Immortality*. Produced Róbert Bokor. Budapest: Magyar Televisio, 1996. Videocassette.

⁴³ *Magyar Nemzet*, 17 June 1989, p. 2.

⁴⁴ *June 16th, 1989*. Produced by Dér-Pesty. Budapest: Black Box, 1989. Videocassette.

⁴⁵ *Népszabadság*, 17 June 1989, p.3.

⁴⁶ János M. Rainer, interview by author, 6 April 1998.

⁴⁷ *Magyar Nemzet*, 17 June 1989, p. 3.

suddenly changed into great supporters of Imre Nagy. Nor can we understand that the party leaders, who made us study from books which falsified the Revolution, now rush to touch the coffins, as if they were charms of good luck.”⁴⁸ The charged speech prompted the Hungarian people to applaud seven times.

Though reform communists appeared at the funeral to perform *kegyelet*, they had only recently attempted to repossess the symbol of Imre Nagy. As such, they were associated with the conservative members of the Hungarian Communist Party and linked with the Kádár regime and the Soviet Union. This created a deadly attachment with the history of a regime legitimized by the force of a foreign occupier. Never able to shake off this image, the communists were thus driven from power. Commenting on the importance of the funeral, Imre Mécés stated that the “meaning of the ceremony was driven home by the Hungarian people. In a referendum held in November of 1989 the Hungarian people abolished the military arm of the communist party, closed their offices in the workplace and voted to examine in detail the party’s financing.”⁴⁹

The opposition clearly understood the significance of the event at the Plenary Session of the National Roundtable Negotiations three days before the funeral on June 13, 1989. Imre Konya, MDF, stated, “After thirty years of numbness, our society has finally risen. The formation of independent organizations, and of large-scale demonstrations indicate that it (our society) wants to control its own fate.” He continued, “Burying the martyrs of the Revolution and commencing these talks can mark the beginning of national reconciliation. Real reconciliation, however, can be achieved by burying the existing dictatorial power system.”⁵⁰

The focus of the event was on the contents of the caskets as symbols of national sovereignty, not the disparity of political views that abounded within the opposition or for that matter, even the Hungarian people themselves. This can be seen in the number of different political symbols seen together at the event. For example, there were flags bearing the Royal and Kossuth coat of arms. Members of the various factions within the opposition were well aware of political differences, but they were unimportant to the vast majority of Hungarians that came to the funeral.⁵¹

One of the reasons why the Hungarian people did not need to “go to the barricades” is in part explained by the disparity of symbolic interpretation between the people and state made manifest at the funeral of Imre Nagy. By attending the funeral, Hungarians legitimized the opposition factions and hastened the end of the communist regime. The sociologist János Kis asserts, “the ceremony became the moral burial of the whole post-

⁴⁸ Henry Kamm, “The Funeral of Imre Nagy,” *New York Times*, 17 June 1989, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Imre Mécés, interview by author, 7 November 1997.

⁵⁰ Opening Full Session of the National Roundtable Negotiations June 13, 1989, A Compendium of Declassified Documents.

⁵¹ The opposition to the communist regime then in power was a coalition of forces that embraced Free Democrats, The Hungarian Democratic Forum, Christian Democrats and Young Democrats among others. Each faction had a very different idea of what a sovereign Hungary should be like. For example, a social democracy as advocated by the Free Democrats or a more conservative laissez-faire capitalist state as advocated by the conservative faction of the Hungarian Democratic Forum.

1956 regime.”⁵² This is born out not only in regard to the electoral choices made by the Hungarian people, but by the collapse of the Hungarian Communist Party without the military backing of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the negotiations the MSZMP had attempted to negotiate separately with the various opposition groups in a bid to maintain power. Realizing that time was not on their side the Political Committee determined to conclude the negotiations quickly. They rejected opposition demands that the party abandon institutions of power found in the workplace and the militia. In order to capitalize on the popularity of Imre Pozsgay as the icon of democratic reform, the communists wanted the current parliament to elect a president for the new state.⁵³ Hoping to safeguard the work of the negotiations that would ensure the establishment of a democracy the leader of the MDF, József Antall, urged the Opposition Roundtable to accept a compromise that included the MSZMP position. Antall’s call for compromise on these issues was rejected by both FIDESZ and SZDSZ who instead called for a referendum, foreshadowing the partisanship that would mark the politics of the Republic.⁵⁴

The Imre Nagy Memory Bill

When the Republic of Hungary was declared on October 23, 1989 a contentious debate began to rage among the political factions in regard to Imre Nagy’s place among Hungarian heroes. The initial interpretations of the political transition that had taken place in Hungary and Central Europe were framed in terms that extolled the success of Western liberalism at the expense of both the Soviet socialist model and the socialist welfare model of Western Europe. In many ways these interpretations reflected the political ideology left over in the wake of the Cold War. In this light communism, always anathema to the values of economic progress unleashed by liberal ideology, died a deserving death. Socialism was then transformed into the poor sister of the failed communist ideology and was thus discredited.

Imre Nagy as a national communist was problematic to those who espoused this ideology. On the one hand, during the 1956 Revolution Nagy had advocated a sovereign Hungarian State, thus appearing to be an ideological ally of the West. On the other hand, he advocated strong state intervention in regard to economic equity and social welfare. Nagy had also been associated with the Moscow faction that was ultimately responsible for the creation of an authoritarian state under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi.

A concerted effort was made by the strong right wing factions within the coalition government of the Hungarian Democratic Forum that had come to power in the elections of 1990 to remove Nagy’s name from the First Act of Parliament. The First Act declared that the 1956 Hungarian Revolution had been a legitimate War of Independence and that the revolutionaries who had fought in it were martyrs of the nation. The original bill had

⁵² János Kis, “Between Reform and Revolution,” *Lawful Revolution in Hungary*, 45.

⁵³ Zoltán Ripp, “Unity and Division: The Opposition Roundtable and Its Relationship to the Communist Party,” *The Roundtable Talks of 1989*, 13-14, 25-26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

recognized Imre Nagy's role as prime minister, but in a last minute revision, his name was eliminated.⁵⁵ This infuriated parliamentarians from the center and left wing of the Forum along with other factions including the Free Democrats and Socialists.⁵⁶ This, in turn, ensured that the symbolic image of Nagy would be used as a pivot on which to base factional legitimacy and their various interpretations of what the nation state should be.

In June of 1996 the Hungarian Parliament passed a law that made Imre Nagy the Martyred Prime Minister of the Nation. The Imre Nagy memory bill was proposed and introduced to the Hungarian Parliament by the Socialist Party and by two members of the Free Democrats. Massive unemployment and the seeming distance the MDF seemed to place between itself and the welfare of the Hungarian people had all but assured ascension of the Socialists in 1994.⁵⁷ The discarding of Nagy in 1990 had allowed the Socialists to "capture" his symbolic figure and propose legislation that would legitimate a chain of history suitable to themselves, that would at once legitimize the Party, and most importantly, diffuse the opposition's claims that they were the inheritors of the Communists "mantle" that linked them to the suppression of the 1956 Revolution. Imre Szekeres likened the transformation of the Socialists to the spiritual transformation of Paul. The legitimacy of the Socialists stemmed from their association with the reforms of Imre Nagy in 1953 that marked an explicit break with Stalinism.⁵⁸

The Free Democrats broke ranks with its coalition partner, with the exception of Imre Mécs and Péter Zwack, and led the opposition response to the proposed legislation. Aliz Halda explained that Hungarians should be free to memorialize whom they wished. To legislate the memorialization of a political figure smacked of political coercion and was not appropriate in a democratic State. They further claimed that Imre Nagy would never have wanted his name associated with this type of legislation. It would be better for the country as a whole to simply drop the proposed legislation than to carry on a legislative tradition that had been corrupted by the politics of the moment. For the majority of Free Democrats who had been in the forefront of dissent to the communist regime prior to 1989, a memorialization of Imre Nagy by many of those who were responsible for the destruction of the Revolution was unpalatable.⁵⁹

Allowing the Socialists to memorialize Nagy and rewrite the history of 1956 was equally odious to the opposition that included The Smallholders (FKGP), MDF and FIDESZ.⁶⁰ In an interesting parliamentary maneuver, Ottó Sándorffy of the Smallholders Party

⁵⁵ Gábor Murányi, "Running in Place for a Second Time," *Heti Világgazdaság*, no. 12, 24 March, 1996, 94.

⁵⁶ According to Miklós Vásárhelyi (SZDSZ) MPs had only seconds to decide how to vote and were concerned with the "prestige of the Hungarian government in front of the diplomatic corps." Interview by author October 7, 1997.

⁵⁷ There are multiple explanations for the defeat of the center right coalition, but both Ferenc Glatz and Gábor Tóka address the issue of economics and social security as major factors accounting for change in their respective essays, "Multiparty System in Hungary, 1989-94," and Parties and Their Voters in 1990 and 1994," see especially pages 23-25 and 141-143 in *Lawful Revolution in Hungary*.

⁵⁸ Az Országgyűlés (hereafter The Minutes of Parliament): tavaszi ülésakának 41. Ülésnapja 1996, Június 3-án, hétfőn, 21200.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 21203.

⁶⁰ During the first government 1990-1994 FIDESZ had aligned itself with the center-right politics of the MDF.

underscored Nagy's acceptance of the ideals of the 1956 Revolution and his connection to the other martyrs. In a stirring speech, Sándorffy compared the Hungarian people's demand for the restoration of Imre Nagy as Prime Minister on October 23rd, 1956 to the acclamation of King Matthias Corvinus by the Hungarian people and their lords and bishops in January of 1458. Sándorffy distanced Nagy from the communists by stating that Nagy knew that his communist comrades would "never forgive his choice to be Hungarian." A reference to Nagy's decision to join with the ideals of the Revolution and go to the gallows rather than step down as Prime Minister and betray the Revolution. Sándorffy claimed that Nagy would never have wanted to be separated from the Revolutionaries who had given their lives for the Revolution and proceeded to read the names of 405 martyrs into the minutes of Parliament.⁶¹ The entire Parliament stood as the names were read which took the rest of the afternoon and early morning of the next day. Sándorffy stated that the Smallholders would support the bill as long all of the names were included along with Nagy's name in the bill. Sándorffy claimed that he had purposely read the names in order to ensure that the martyrs were properly memorialized even though he realized at the time that his amendment to the bill was sure to be defeated.⁶²

The Socialists were outraged by this maneuver and responded by stating that one of the names, Francia Kis, was in fact a former fascist. The Socialist's objections echoed the apologies used by the Kádár regime to excuse the suppression of the Revolution. The Smallholder Party and MDF both included factions who embraced the politics of the interwar years under Hungary's Vice Regent, Miklós Horthy 1920-1944 as being legitimate and excused his alliance with the Axis powers and an official policy of anti-Semitism that led to genocide based on an almost single minded policy of territorial revision and anti bolshevism.⁶³ According to Tamás Ungvári, the restoration of the *true* history of one of Europe's oldest nations was one of the objectives of József Antall, who became the first Prime Minister of the Republic, (1990-1993). Preserving Hungary's sovereignty in the treacherous politics of World War II Europe was Horthy's first concern though it left Hungary on the "wrong side" at the end of the war.⁶⁴ Political factions holding to this philosophy had existed during the 1956 Revolution, but had not had time to mature. According to the historian János M. Rainer the Revolution remained largely in the hands of the democratic socialists.⁶⁵ By including the names of those Revolutionaries who were anti communist, Sándorffy attached Nagy to a history akin to the one enunciated by Antall. Linking Nagy to King Matthias Corvinus served to further distance Nagy from what the MDF and Smallholders saw as the "imported" ideology of the Socialists.

⁶¹ The Minutes of Parliament. Június 3-an, hétfőn, 21203.

⁶² Ottó Sándorffy, interview by author, Budapest, 16 September 1997.

⁶³ For excellent discussions of this period see: István Deák, "A Fatal Compromise? The Debate over Collaboraton and Resistance in Hungary," *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*, István Deák, Jan T. Gross, Tony Judt, Ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918-1944* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1994) and Tibor Hajdú, Zsuzsa L. Nagy, "Revolution, Counterrevolution, Consolidation," *A History of Hungary*.

⁶⁴ Tamás Ungvári, "Culture and Crisis: The Pains of Transition," *Lawful Revolution in Hungary*, 284-285.

⁶⁵ János M. Rainer, interview by author, Budapest, 2 June 1998.

FIDESZ and the MDF joined the Smallholders in their demands that the martyrs be included in the bill. The speeches given by both parties continued the opposition's blistering attack on the Socialists linking them to the Kádár regime and the suzerainty of the former Soviet Union. Miklós Csapody of the MDF demanded that the Socialists apologize for the brutality of Kádár's terror and the Soviet backed repression of the Revolution. Responding to the charges that the opposition wished to memorialize fascists among the martyrs, Csapody compared the *Pufajkások* to the police of Nazi Germany.⁶⁶ The Socialist Prime Minister Gyula Horn (1994-1998) had been a member of the *Pufajkások*, a militia group formed by the Kádár regime to aid in the suppression of the Revolution. FIDESZ reiterated claims made at Nagy's funeral that the Socialists were responsible not only for the death of the martyrs, but also the death of civic society in Hungary.⁶⁷ Both parties explicitly associated the Socialists with foreign Soviet "Asiatic" influences using terms such as Mongols and Tatars to describe the communists and by connection the Socialists.

The debate grew more and more rancorous as the charges of collaboration with communist and fascists once again rose to the surface. During the detailed debate the Free Democrats retreated from their earlier stance against the bill and joined the opposition by proposing that besides including the names of the martyrs, the bill should also name those who had perpetrated the crimes against Imre Nagy and the martyrs.⁶⁸ The opposition, including the MDF, demanded that what had been deleted from the First Act of Parliament be restored in the Memorial bill. Imre Mécs also broke with the Socialists during the debate demanding that the names of the martyrs be included.⁶⁹ The coalition that had brought the communist government down in 1989 had for a moment been restored over what they considered to be a dangerous revision of history by many of those who had been their bitter enemies only seven years previous.

Ultimately the bill passed without the various amendments proposed on June 26th, 1996, with a Socialist majority of 165. In an ironic twist Nagy had been memorialized by the party most closely associated with the Kádár regime. The "capture" of Nagy as a symbol had been made possible by the last minute coup of the conservative faction of the MDF, who were previously angered by the dominance of the democratic socialists embodied by the Free Democrats during the years of protest against the communists. The non-communists had always been uneasy partners with the Nagy faction during the Revolution. For them communism had always been and remained anathema to their concept of a Hungarian State. The Socialists recognized the importance of Nagy as a symbol of national sovereignty, perhaps more in accord with the Hungarian people's own beliefs about Imre Nagy. Though his communist past makes him a contested symbol, very few Hungarians would argue that Nagy by his final actions during the Revolution and later in 1958 made him a martyr of the Hungarian nation.

⁶⁶ The Minutes of Parliament. Június 4-én, kedden 21317-21318.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 21327.

⁶⁸ The Minutes of Parliament, Június 11-én kedden 22073-22074.

⁶⁹ Mécs claimed that he had become increasingly disgruntled with the Socialists over this issue and after the ceremonies in Plot 301 on the anniversary of Nagy's execution on June 16, 1996 he never attended memorial ceremonies where they would be present.

János Kádár died on July 6, 1989, the same day Imre Nagy had been exonerated by the Presidential Council of the Supreme Court. A substantial number of Hungarians attended his funeral. Whether marking the end of an era, or to honor the memory of one who had delivered on socialist prosperity, the political importance of his funeral was short lived, as evidenced by the Socialists need to attach themselves to the memory of Nagy. In spite of attempts to bury and reconcile the past, traces of the tumultuous history of Hungary in the twentieth century continue to inhabit its contemporary political dialogue.

Though often overshadowed by pressing issues such as economy and the problems accompanying European integration, the public debate over the history and memory of the 1956 Revolution has continued unabated since 1989. The potency of this debate was again revealed in the national election in the Spring of 2002 where charges of collaboration with Hungary's communist past were raised. In a bitter contest, members of FIDESZ in power between 1998-2002, revealed that Socialist candidate Peter Medgyessy had been a member of Hungary's secret service during the 1970's. The charges continued to dog him even after the Socialists won a narrow victory over FIDESZ with calls for Medgyessy to resign for his lack of candor about the issue.⁷⁰ Following fast upon these charges were counter charges leveled at the new chairman of FIDESZ, Zoltan Pokorni, revealing that his parents had collaborated with the Kádár in the wake of the failed Revolution. Pokorni resigned within a week of these charges being leveled against him.⁷¹

The contested memory of Nagy provides a way to access the very complex nature of the Hungarian transition and helps explain why the ghosts of the Revolution continue to make their presence known in the contemporary political scene. Political scientists like András Bozóki are right to emphasize the unique process of negotiation that marked the Hungarian transition as it not only marks an alternative to violent revolution, but that it also provides insight into the complexity that marked this rapid political transition. I have argued here that the memory of 1956 plays a significant role in the transition, as it is the critical factor arbitrating political legitimacy. Like the negotiated process, the enunciation of this contested memory reveals fault lines between the various factions vying for power, and thus, is a crucial factor in explaining both the transition and the continued debate over the nature of the State.

⁷⁰ A synopsis of the problem can be found in the Hungarian weekly *168 óra*, June 27, 2002.

⁷¹ *Magyar Hirlap*, July 4, 2002.