

THE PETOFI CIRCLE: FORUM FOR FERMENT IN THE HUNGARIAN THAW

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Revolutions, like plutonium, explode only when a critical mass is at hand. In the East European thaw of 1953-1956, the gathering together of this critical mass was greatly aided by intellectuals' discussion groups. Like the Jacobin clubs in the French Revolution, such meeting places for speeches, agitation, and the restoration of mutual confidence after the atomizing years of Stalinist terror were important components of the revolutionary process. In Poland this component was the discussion clubs of the young intelligentsia, particularly the *Krzywe Kolo* in Warsaw. The fact that such discussion clubs did not arise in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, or the Balkans was one of the major signs, and indeed the causes, of their failure to experience revolutionary ferment at the Polish or Hungarian level.¹ In Hungary this aspect of the thaw was primarily represented in the Petöfi Circle.

By May 1956, a new stage in the Hungarian thaw had been reached: the "break-through" into the area of mass communication and agitation. Its key institutional expression was the Petöfi Circle.² Officially this was a Budapest discussion group of young intelligentsia, a subordinate organization of the Communist youth organization DISZ. In early 1956, however, it rapidly broke free from these official bonds and became in itself a major force on the Hungarian political

1. These developments are covered in my forthcoming book "The East European Thaw."

2. Vd. especially two studies by two of its former leaders, Pal Jonas, "My Generation," *East Europe*, VI, 7 (July 1957), pp. 17-27 and Balazs Nagy, "The Petöfi Circle," MS., Columbia University Refugee Project-Hungary [hereafter cited as CURPH]. Vd. also accounts by other eye-witnesses: Istvan Meszaros, *La rivolta degli intellettuali in Ungheria* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1958), pp. 184-205; Tamas Aczel and Tibor Meray, *The Revolt of the Mind* (N. Y.: Praeger, 1959), pp. 398-412; Heltai MS. (CURPH); a detailed unpublished MS. (in Hungarian) by Kalman Potoczky [summarized in Ferenc Vali, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1961)], pp. 227-229, 254, 266-267; News from *Behind the Iron Curtain*, [hereafter cited as NBIC], V, 8 (Aug. 1956), pp. 38-42; *The Truth about the Nagy Affair* (N. Y.: Praeger, 1959) [hereafter cited as TANA], pp. 54-58; Paul Kecskemeti, *The Unexpected Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), pp. 53, 72-76; Vali, *loc. cit.*

and social scene, what Gerö in July called a "second political center."³

Its leading members were by 1956 in their thirties. They had been influenced by the internationalism of the Boy Scout movement, the concern for the poor peasantry and the common man of the "Village Explorers," the anti-Nazi resistance during the war (particularly the 1943 Youth Congress at Balatonszarszo), and, after 1945, by the Hungarian Collegiate Association (of the 1945-1947 Independent Youth Movement), which in 1947 was absorbed by the Communist Peoples' Colleges (NEKOSz). The latter was dissolved in 1949 as "Rajkist," its leaders (as well as those of the former Collegiate Association) jailed, and its members discriminated against in their professions. Released during the 1953-1955 period, these imprisoned youth leaders were largely instrumental in the Petöfi Circle's activities. Originating in meetings in late 1954 of a group of eight to ten people in the Kossuth Club (itself established only in 1953), the Petöfi Circle was established on Nov. 15, 1955, and Gabor Tanczos elected its head.⁴ Although remaining until the Revolution officially a Communist organization, it soon developed into a conscious instrument of the Hungarian young intelligentsia for freedom, humanism and national independence, and, far more than the Writers' Association, into a spokesman for the Hungarian liberal, patriotic, democratic tradition. Its leaders were greatly influenced by such pro-Nagy revisionists as Losonczy and Haraszti, and those in the Writers' Association. They had initially wanted to call it the Galilei Circle, after the radical pre-1914 "Galilei Circle" of Ady and Jaszi, but the Communist Party ordered them to call it the Petöfi Circle. Ironically enough, this Communist move made it symbolically what it was in reality: a revolutionally rallying point for Hungarian youth, as Petöfi had been in 1848. Its official leadership (almost all party members and half employees of the party apparatus) was carefully selected by its leading members so as to seem acceptable to the party, but in fact to ensure control by the antiregime group in it. The DISZ leadership, weakened by the New Course and thaw and itself divided and uncertain, was forced by the policy of "democratization" to accept it.⁵ In early 1956 its public discussions were attended only by a relatively few intellectuals, but, as with so much else in Hungary, the CPSU Twentieth Congress was the turning point in its development.

3. Speech to the July CC Plenum after Rakosi's "resignation"; *Szabad Nep*, July 19, 1956; quoted from Paul E. Zinner, ed. *National Communism and Popular Revolt in Eastern Europe* (N. Y.: Columbia U. Press, 1956) [hereafter cited as NCPREE], p. 344.

4. Potoczky MS., pp. 9-10. It was accepted officially by the party only on March 17, 1956 (Vali, *op. cit.*, p. 220).

5. B. Nagy MS. (CURPH), pp. 23-25; for a list, vd. TANA, pp. 55-56. For a rural DISZ organization which was in fact a disguised antiregime resistance group, vd. Vali, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

The first Petöfi Circle debate was on the re-establishment of a separate students' organization, the MEFESz, which had been forcibly merged into the Communist youth organization DISZ. Then one was held on György Dozsa, the leader of the 1514 peasant revolt; this turned into a general discussion of agriculture. In late May 1956, one was held on "The Twentieth Soviet Party Congress and the Problems of Hungarian Political Economy"; it turned into an all-out denunciation of Rakosi's "megalomania": his economic policies of senseless industrial construction, forced industrialization, the proposed new Five Year Plan, and the lack of realism of his agricultural policy. The speakers demanded a more rational price system, better statistical data, higher wages, and an economists' conference to discuss and revise the new plan.⁶ This debate, like the two following it on engineering and (a preliminary one) on historiography, had been deliberately ostensibly centered on an academic subject so as to avoid party interference, but was in fact "prepared" by its organizers so as to bring the maximum amount of pressure for reform on the regime.⁷ On June 1, the discussion on historiography showed that the party hack and cultural politruk Erzsebet Andics was incapable of holding her own in debate. (This was one of many instances where the Petöfi Circle debates discredited high Communist dignitaries.) Its participants denounced before an audience of a thousand the falsifications and distortions of regime historiography, accusing it of having perverted the writing of history into political pamphlets to glorify party functionaries.⁸ At this meeting, as was inevitable when a subject so politically sensitive as history was discussed, various speakers emphasized positive aspects of past Hungarian history and of the West, while criticizing an overly-favorable historical evaluation of the Soviet Union. Reportedly even the 1920 Treaty of Trianon was criticized by one speaker (something the post-1945 Communist regime had forbidden), and World War II Premier Kallay's attempt to get out of the war was treated favorably, as were other Hungarian parties, particularly the Social Democrats, while giving all the credit for the progressive elements in Hungarian history to the Communists was denounced. Speakers declared that the "leading role" of the Soviet Union had been overemphasized, as had the Soviet contribution to

6. Pal Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 23 and *Magyar Nemzet*, May 24, 1956, in *NBIC*, V, 8 (Aug. 1956), p. 38; B. Nagy MS., pp. 21-23; I. Meszaros, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-195; Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, pp. 399-400; Janos Meszaros, "On the Eve of a Revolution," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, XVIII, 1 (Apr. 1958), p. 63; Potoczky MS., p. 37; Vali, *op. cit.*, p. 228; list of speakers: *TANA*, p. 57.

7. B. Nagy MS., pp. 20-21.

8. Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 23; I. Meszaros, *op. cit.*, p. 193; Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 400; B. Nagy MS., pp. 26-27; RFE(M)/PAO, "Petöfi Club Meeting for Historians on June 4, 1956," Aug. 1, 1956; "Discussion-meeting of historians in the Petöfi Circle," *Szazadok*, XC, 3 (1956), pp. 425-440; Potoczky MS., p. 38; list of speakers: *TANA*, pp. 57-58.

the 1945 defeat of Japan. Regime distortion and belittling of the West's role in World War II was attacked, and one speaker declared that suppressing the truth about the West had led only to "cosmopolitanism" (i.e., pro-Western feeling). The extent of the criticism at this meeting greatly increased attendance at subsequent ones. After this meeting, Andics tried and failed, because of the post-Twentieth Congress atmosphere, to prevent further public Petöfi Circle Debates.

A June 14 discussion on philosophy and pedagogy was highlighted by the appearance of György Lukacs, who said that Hungarian Marxism was in a catastrophic situation, worse than under Horthy. Lukacs praised "independent thinking," warned against citing Lenin in the same fashion in which Stalin had been cited, and urged the study of non-Marxist philosophers: Plato, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Lukacs' rebellious supporters demanded a public rehearing of the cases against him and Dery.⁹ One of Lukacs' former pupils, Jozsef Szigeti (who denounced him again after the Revolution) arose to confess that he was deeply ashamed for having betrayed Lukacs in 1949 by supporting Revai, and declared that Lukacs had been, and remained, entirely right. Lukacs himself, in an article written at this same time, developed some suggestive and potentially radical theses concerning the ideological innovations of the Twentieth Congress as opposed to the ideological deviations of Stalinism.¹⁰ Emphasizing the dynamic nature of Leninist analysis, he declared that Stalin's equation of Social Democracy with Fascism was a mechanical and incorrect adaptation of the 1917 capitalism vs. socialism situation to a period where the primary struggle was between Fascism and anti-Fascism. He cited the Twentieth Congress (particularly Khrushchev's public speech, with its repudiation of the Stalinist doctrine of the inevitability of war) as evidence that the primary present struggle was that for peaceful coexistence and against war and concluded from this that

... we are on the eve of a prolonged period of peace, and ... each and every capitalist country will be led towards socialism solely by the dialectic of its own internal development, ... we—the Communists of the other countries—can influence this development only ideologically.

and, further, that this required "humane" socialism:

9. I. Meszaros, *op. cit.*, p. 195; Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 401; list of speakers: *TANA*, p. 58; summary of Lukacs' speech, *Szabad Nep*, June 17, 1956; cf. Vali, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-230. The Potoczky MS., pp. 40-41, states that another pedagogical meeting occurred several days previously.

10. *Tarsadalmi Szemle*, July 1956 and *Aufbau* (East Berlin), Sept. 1956; summary and tr. excerpts: *Soviet Survey*, No. 10, Nov. 1956, reprinted in Walter Z. Laqueur and George Lichtheim, eds., *The Soviet Cultural Scene 1956-1957* (London: Atlantic Books and Stevens & Sons and N. Y.: Praeger, 1958), pp. 95-103, from which the quotations given here are taken.

... The more we take co-existence seriously, that is to say, the more humanely we construct socialism—humanely in terms of our own interest, in the light of our own development—the more shall we contribute to the final world-wide triumph of socialism.

Lukacs then provided an ideological justification for a rapprochement with Protestantism and Catholicism, citing the anti-Adenauer attitude of Barth and Niemöller, the left-wing movements in French and Italian Catholicism, and the admission by the Jesuit authority on dialectical materialism, Fr. Wetter, of “certain similarities of Thomist and Marxist thought.” He deduced from this that “we have... the possibility of a dialogue... between theologians and Marxists.” He then took a side-swipe at Zhdanovism:

Parenthetically, one may inquire what would have been the position of a philosopher in such a discussion who had never read Hegel, not to mention Aristotle, because he had learned from Zhdanov that Hegel was a reactionary philosopher and the author of a reactionary dialectic. There might well have ensued a dialogue in which the Catholic theologian would have argued on the basis of solid understanding of the old dialectic, while the sectarian Communist would have been helpless....

and concluded by repudiating the charges made against him in 1949, referring to them as

... an instance of what happens in our struggle in the international field, and of course also in our internal disputes, by applying that distortion of dialectical materialism which has in recent decades been introduced under the slogan of party-mindedness. Analysis is eliminated, and its place is taken by empty phrases and unmotivated abuse.

On June 18 there was a discussion of Communist ex-partisans and pre-1945 illegal party functionaries on “socialist legality.” Following their usual tactic of using Marxist-Leninist arguments to discredit the regime, speakers denounced Stalin and Stalinists for having violated the fundamental principles of Marxism by trying to force the superstructure (state, law, purges, terror) to change the base (normal economic development). Karoly Kiss, chairman of the party control commission, who presided, criticized Stalin as “anti-Leninist” for having treated law as an independent force (i.e., like the “base”) instead of one determined by means of production (i.e., “superstructure”—an attitude which must have confused the Stalinists present.¹¹) The meeting turned into a violent emotional demonstration through the speech of Laszlo Rajk’s widow Julia. As reported by Meray and Aczel, she declared:

Comrades, I stand before you deeply moved after five years of prison and humiliation. Let me tell you this: so far as prisons are concerned, in Horthy’s

11. Vali, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

prisons conditions were far better even for Communists than in Rákosi's prisons. Not only was my husband killed, but my little baby was torn from me; for years, I received no letters and no information about the fate of my little son. These criminals have not only murdered László Rajk. They have trampled underfoot all sentiment and honesty in this country. Murderers should not be criticized—they should be punished. I shall never rest until those who have ruined the country, corrupted the Party, destroyed thousands, and driven millions into despair receive their just punishment. Comrades, help me in this struggle!¹²

Various other meetings were held during June, on natural resources, on music (where Hungary's greatest living composer, Zoltan Kodaly, demanded that Hungary's music life be freed and revived), and on June 21 on jurisprudence, where the slowness in rehabilitating Social Democrats, the appointing instead of electing of judges, and the inadequate compensation for confiscated property were all condemned.¹³

The party leadership still hesitated to intervene against the Petöfi Circle, perhaps because Rakosi hoped to give time to the opposition to come above ground so that it could more easily be destroyed,¹⁴ but also probably because of its own weakness, indecision, and uncertainty about the Moscow line. On June 24 *Szabad Nep*, itself again infected by the thaw and now under pressure from the Petöfi Circle and its supporters, stated that although there had been "erroneous views" expressed at the discussions, the Petöfi Circle itself was "characterized not by the fostering of bourgeois views, but by a desire for Socialism," and went on to say that

The political and economic mistakes of the past seven or eight years, the fact that Marxism was paralyzed in the icy atmosphere of dogmatism and the personality cult, had a disillusioning effect on intellectuals. The skepticism spreading in intellectual circles, the rejection of theoretical arguments and the escape into the past are all signs closely connected with a decline of Marxism. . . .

The system built on erroneous views must be abandoned, the principle of false authority rejected and above all the practice in scientific life of demanding subordination must be discarded forever. Members of the Petöfi Circle . . . are no longer . . . passive observers, a group of yes-men . . . but people who have learned, who want to benefit from the grave mistakes of recent years. . . . They no longer want to be silent observers of historical events, but thinking and active participants. For this reason, the Petöfi Circle . . . is a valuable forum. and it would be well if our Party and government leaders attended their discussions more often and participated in them. . . .

12. Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, pp. 401-402; letter by Simon Bourgin (TIME-LIFE Vienna correspondent then in Hungary), in Melvin Lasky, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957) [hereafter cited as *HR*], pp. 29-32; Potoczky MS., p. 43 (who gives another version of the Julia Rajk speech); list of speakers: *TANA*, p. 58; Vali, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231.

13. Bourgin, *loc. cit.*

14. B. Nagy MS., p. 33.

The majority of these young and older intellectuals participating in the the discussions were devoted representatives of the general line of Party policy. This means that they accepted not only the correct, main line of Party policy—the ultimate building of Socialism—but also the mistakes . . . and often, the grave and, at times, tragic distortions. . . .

Consequently, if we take a stand against mistakes in national policy, we must also take a stand against our own mistakes. . . . In the course of . . . building Socialism, most of us . . . believed in the false trials, accepted wrong, inhuman working methods, and theories turned into rigid dogmas, believing that all this was Socialistically right. . . . We must search our souls, we must take a determined stand against mistakes instead of indulging in bombastic, tricky displays of self-criticism.¹⁵

Rakosi was now, and with great reason, becoming increasingly determined to stop the run-away development of the Petöfi Circle as a center of mass agitation against his regime, the more so since its main political aim was now clearly his removal and because the ferment it generated did not remain confined to the youth and intelligentsia, but was now beginning to spread among the workers. The real wages and living standard of the workers had become increasingly depressed toward the end of the Stalinist period in Hungary, while the police terror prevented them from openly opposing the regime. They had relapsed into political apathy, their efforts concentrated on keeping alive, a struggle which led to wide-scale thefts, black-market activity, etc. The New Course interlude had been for them, as a worker later wrote,

. . . an oasis in the desert of the Stalinist policy . . . Still doubting and retaining their reservations, people however began to breathe . . .¹⁶

The New Course reversal and thereafter the agonizing slowness of the 1956 liberalization made their mood even worse; as the same worker wrote,

. . . the hot and comforting sun of the Central Committee resolutions, which sincerely denounced the grave faults, did not always succeed in penetrating the working masses, made mute and indifferent to their own fate by the somber period of the past . . .¹⁷

This arose particularly from the fact that party functionaries continued their abuses and, instead of being punished, profited from them. In

15. Quoted from *NBIC*, V, 8 (Aug. 1956), p. 39; vd. Jonas, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

16. Letter of Laszlo Pal, a Stakhanovite mill-worker at the great Csepel steel mills, in *Irodalmi Ujsag*, Oct. 13, 1956; tr.: "La revolte de la Hongrie," *Les Temps Modernes*, Nos. 129-130-131 (Nov.-Dec. 1956, Jan. 1957) [hereafter cited as *LTM(H)*], pp. 928-932, at p. 930.

17. *Ibid.*, at p. 928; cf. letter of Ervin Eisner, mill-worker at Csepel, in *Irodalmi Ujsag*, June 20, 1956; tr.: *LTM(H)*, pp. 921-925, at p. 923.

addition to their hatred of the depressed economic conditions, the police terror and the party tyranny, many of the workers—those relatively few who remained politically conscious and interested—passionately wanted to play some role in their own fate. As a blacksmith wrote at the end of June:

... One cannot dispute that today is better than yesterday. But it still isn't as I've imagined "tomorrow."

However, it's certainly true that no one often notices even my existence, and, if it is noticed, I'm taken for a marionette. (Those are hard words, but life is harder still.) How many times have I been obliged to accept the opinion of others, one which I perhaps don't share. As that opinion changes, it's demanded that mine change equally. And that makes me feel sick, sicker than if I'd been beaten. I'm a man, I too. I also have a head which I use to think. And I'm not a child. I'm an adult, who gives his soul, his heart, his youth and his energy for the construction of socialism. I work more every day. The sweat pours off my body. My clothes are white like the salt desert of the Alföld—full of salt. Tomorrow I'll work still more and my clothes will be more white. I do it willingly, but I want to be considered like an adult who lives and knows how to think. I want to be able to speak my thoughts without having anything to fear—and I want to be heard as well ...¹⁸

The workers at the industrial center of Diosgyör in northeast Hungary were described as being

... thirsty for humanity! They are thirsty for an answer if they greet someone; that they should be paid attention to, that they should be answered when they write; that things that are unbearable should be remedied, but that they should not be answered by passing on their complaints to others with a bureaucratic insensibility and dryness of heart ...¹⁹

All these reports, with one exception, were published in *Irodalmi Ujsag* at the end of May and in June; their appearance was in itself clear evidence that the ties between the rebellious writers and the rest of the intelligentsia on the one hand and the workers on the other were growing.

In this respect the Petöfi Circle was a central meeting ground. The Budapest factories and some from the provinces regularly sent delegations to its meetings, the members of which passed on what had happened to other workers. As the Petöfi Circle meetings proceeded, particularly after Mrs. Rajk's emotional philippic against Rakosi, the interest of the workers grew rapidly, their feeling of sympathy for and participation with the writers and youth leaders (whom initially they had hated as Communists and profiteers of the regime) in the struggle

18. Bela Kiss, blacksmith in a Budapest steel factory, in *Irodalmi Ujsag*, June 30, 1956; tr.: *LTM(H)*, pp. 926-927.

19. Mihaly Gergely in *Irodalmi Ujsag*, May 26, 1956; tr.: *LTM(H)*, pp. 933-934.

against Rakosi rose,²⁰ and their demands for tickets of admission to the meetings exceeded the supply. The regime apparently became convinced that the Petöfi Circle leaders were deliberately agitating among the workers. In fact, this seems not to have been the case, but Rakosi's consciousness of the rising worker ferment was one of the major factors in his decision to take drastic action.²¹ Rakosi hoped (as did the Natolin in Poland) to split the workers and peasants from the intelligentsia by concentrating on alleviating the economic grievances of the masses while ruthlessly repressing the intellectuals. But the Stalinist period in Hungary had so identified in the minds of the workers and peasants their economic misery with the Soviet-dominated political tyranny and Soviet economic exploitation of the country that the workers were quite as "politicized" as the intelligentsia; during the Revolution they proved to be more extreme in their demands for total and immediate freedom.²²

But Rakosi also needed a pretext, and if possible several. The first one was given him by the Petöfi Circle press debate on June 27.²³ The meeting was scheduled for the Budapest Officers' Club in the late afternoon. By 4:00 p.m. it was already impossible to get in the packed hall; thousands listened to a loudspeaker transmission outside. The meeting went on until 4:00 a.m. the next morning. Nogradi, Horvath and Vas represented the party leadership. After a feeble opening statement by Horvath, saying that the meeting was intended as an opportunity for criticism and self-criticism, the Communist writer Tibor Dery, one of the major rebels, began to speak; this was the turning point and the first great climax of the meeting. First he told off Horvath:

... He doesn't stand for himself at all, and sometimes it's hard to tell whether he even stands for the party. One day he's extreme right, and other days extreme left; one never knows where he stands.

then Revai:

... he knows what he says isn't the truth, but he goes ahead and says it anyway.

then Darvas, still Minister of Culture:

... He's afraid of himself. That's all there is to be said about him.²⁴

20. Laszlo Pal, *op. cit.*, in LTM(H), p. 931; CURPH.

21. I. Meszaros, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-197.

22. Cf. Paul Ignatus, "L'unité nationale hongroise," *Preuves*, No. 72 (Feb. 1957), p. 40.

23. S. Bourgin, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-32; Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, pp. 402-412; *Politika* [Belgrade] from Budapest, July 1, 1956, in *NBIC*, V, 8 (Aug. 1956), pp. 39-40; Potoczky MS., pp. 47ff.; list of speakers: *TANA*, p. 58.

24. S. Bourgin, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

He then, and for the first time publicly during the Hungarian thaw, raised perhaps *the* decisive theme of Eastern European revisionism, the one which in Poland (as with Djilas in Yugoslavia) had been the prelude to the abandonment of Leninism: the necessity for changes in the *system* of Marxism-Leninism rather than in the individuals administering it:

As long as we direct our criticism against individuals instead of investigating whether the mistakes spring from the very system—from the very ideology—we can achieve nothing more than to exchange evil for a lesser evil. I trust we will get rid of our present leaders. All I fear is that the limping race horses will be followed by limping donkeys. . . . Whenever the party alters its attitude—and this may happen several times in succession—it is the duty of the members of the Central Committee, the other party clerks, and the ordinary party members to represent and defend the party's current political line. Even though they may not agree with it! What follows from this, comrades? Dear friends, don't you notice that I have here laid my hands on a structural mistake, on something independent of people? . . . We must seek in our socialist system the mistakes which not only permit our leaders to misuse their power, but which also render us incapable of dealing with each other with the humanity we deserve. The mistakes in question are structural mistakes that curtail, to an entirely unnecessary degree, the individual's rights and that, again unnecessarily, increase his burdens. . . .²⁵

Tardos, citing the example of Petöfi in 1848, demanded immediate and structural changes in the regime:

. . . For years, the Petöfi statues have been looking down upon us questioningly, severely, with loathing. It seems to me that they want us to account for the freedom of the press. . . . We know from experience that there aren't many peasants, workers, and intellectuals in this "satellite" Hungary who wish to restore Horthyite Hungary—at least, I haven't met many. . . . But there are many who consider this dogmatic leadership, this bureaucratism, this lack of information, this obscurantism alien to our people and to our ideals. They are right, and it is up to the leadership to draw its own conclusions, to change its line, to analyze its theories and alter its practices—not gradually and imperceptibly, but unequivocally, immediately, and structurally.²⁶

Tibor Meray, as did many of the others, insisted that telling the truth was the primary duty of all Hungarians, party members or not, and freedom their primary objective:

. . . The telling of truth is our most imperative inner necessity. Without it, we can no longer face ourselves or our people. . . . It is not the state-owned automobiles, the alternating drivers, the special stores, the extra-high salaries, the protocol list, etc., that make the journalist. It is whether or not he is a militant of truth. And let me add: even now, after the Twentieth Congress, we must fight to be able to tell the truth. They are still trying to smother the writers and

25. Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 404 (from stenographic minutes of the meeting); tr. excerpts also in *TANA*, p. 59 and in *The Counter-revolutionary Conspiracy of Imre Nagy and his Accomplices* (the official Hungarian White Book), V, pp. 28-29.

26. Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 405.

journalists by stressing party loyalty. But what party loyalty is that which opposes truth? What kind of a situation is it when truth is disloyal to the party? Two half-truths do not make one full truth. We want the full truth. Only the full truth will satisfy us. But you can have truth only where there is freedom. And therefore, first and foremost, we demand freedom! Not the freedom of the oppressors, but the freedom of the people.²⁷

One of the leading Hungarian physicists and head of the state atomic energy commission, Professor Lajos Janossy, demanded the end of jamming of Western radio broadcasts and the admission of Western newspapers.²⁸ He then, for the first time publicly, raised the issue of the Soviet exploitation of the Hungarian uranium fields, saying that

... Recently, when we went to Moscow to confer with our Soviet colleagues, it turned out that they knew considerably more about the Hungarian uranium fields than we did. We knew next to nothing about them, but our Soviet colleagues were kind enough to put some of the data at our disposal.²⁹

He declared that he had learned in the Soviet Union that Rakosi had secretly conceded to the Soviets the exclusive right to exploit (and buy at low prices) newly-discovered rich sources of uranium near Pecs. (This information spread like wild-fire throughout Hungary, and, as the demands during the Hungarian Revolution for its abolition show, the allegedly tremendously valuable Hungarian uranium became one of the major symbols of Soviet economic looting of the country.³⁰) Sandor Fekete, a young journalist who had that afternoon returned from covering the Tito visit to Khrushchev in Moscow, summed up what he heard there from Russians and Yugoslavs:

... My experience is that we must expect neither Moscow nor Belgrade to solve our problems for us. We must solve our problems ourselves, right here in Budapest. ...³¹

Tibor Meray made perhaps the most direct attack on Rakosi:

... The sign of good journalists is not a car, a chauffeur, and the privilege to shop in a special store. He must write the truth. But in our country, truth must not contradict the party line. In 1949 Rakosi said that Rajk was a "Titoist," and in 1955 he said Rajk was a "palace provocateur." This year he calls Rajk a "comrade." The masses have lost confidence, not in the Party, but in its leaders. It should be a tragedy of one or two men instead of a whole nation. Truth can be disseminated where there is freedom. ...

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 406-407.

28. S. Bourgin, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

29. Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

30. François Fejtő, *Ungheria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1957), pp. 206-211 (somewhat overstated); Edmund O. Stillman, *The Ideology of Revolution: The People's Demands in Hungary, October-November 1956*, Studies in Contemporary Communism, 1 (N. Y.: Free Europe Press, 1957), p. 35.

31. Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 406; vd. Fekete's article in *Irodalmi Ujsag*, June 2, 1956, re more cultural exchanges with West (tr. *NBIC*, V, 7 (July 1956), p. 47).

Losonczy declared:

... We demand a free press! It is even guaranteed us by the Constitution. What kind of press is it, when Imre Nagy is attacked in *Szabad Nep* and then doesn't get space to defend himself in the same paper. When we can get nowhere the full text of the Khrushchev speech! ...³²

Tardos outlined clearly the party split and ended on a note of lyrical patriotism and revolutionary feeling:

... inside the party there have appeared at least two distinct currents. The first includes those comrades who after the death of Stalin have reflected, who have saluted with enthusiasm the June 1953 program [Nagy's new course] ... These comrades, convinced by the end of the autumn of 1954 of the necessity of removing certain men, Rakosi, Farkas and others as well, have prepared, with their practical and theoretical activity, the conditions which allow us now to draw conclusions from the Twentieth Congress and to apply its teachings. Naturally, above all after the Twentieth Congress, the ranks of this camp have greatly increased....

... The second current includes the comrades of the old school, the dogmatists who have always followed the Stalinist policy and have found it substantially good. They have not yet rejected the fundamentals of that policy, they have not made a concrete critical analysis of it and have continued to follow it temperately, with a greater or lesser degree of compromise. The party proceeds with certain internal tentative moves ... but its advance is very slow.... The spectacle which this offers to the eyes of the people produces immense moral damage. And the material damage is even greater.

Answering Rakosi's criticism that the opposition was "criticizing the party from without," Tardos declared:

... now we are ... outside the narrow circle which wants to continue the dogmatic Stalinist policy, which on occasion descends to compromise but which demonstrates itself incapable of renouncing its old point of view. We are attacking it from the outside. Only that circle is not the party. The party is we, of the other current, we who fight for humane ideas and principles. We, whose demands become always more mixed with those of the people and the fatherland....

Our allies are without number. The science which is being born is on our side, and the need for pure air which the people feel. Ancient culture is with us, and with us is modern research. And Lenin is also with us, Lenin who wrote into history the date of a revolution made to liberate man. With us is Petöfi, and Lajos Kossuth ... who gave freedom of the press to the people, saying, "It is yours, Hungarians"! And ... it is inalienable ...

The meeting was by now in turmoil. When Horvath, after being shouted down three times, said "Don't insult the party," a shout went up, "We are the party!" Another participant, foreshadowing the future, cried, "Lets take Rajk's corpse out of the ditch and give him a fu-

32. S. Bourgin, *op. cit.*, p. 31. (According to an interview with Meray in Paris, Sept. 5, 1960, Bourgin incorrectly assigned these two quotations to Kuczka.)

neral!"³³ When Vas said Rakosi's dismissal would be a personal tragedy, the answer came: "We prefer the tragedy of one man to the tragedy of a nation!"³⁴

The last speaker, in the early morning hours, was Geza Losonczy. A member of the prewar Debrecen Communist group, Deputy Minister of Culture under Revai, Losonczy had been arrested in 1951, tortured, and driven insane. Released and returned to health by 1955, by 1956 he was an editor of *Magyar Nemzet* and one of Imre Nagy's closest associates. Losonczy denounced the Hungarian press for daily attacking and falsely denouncing Imre Nagy, a "good Hungarian and a good Communist," without giving him an opportunity for his own defense. When Losonczy mentioned Nagy, thousands of those present leaped to their feet and shouted "Long live Imre Nagy! Take him back into the party!"³⁵

Less than two weeks before the Petöfi Club press debate, on June 16, Imre Nagy celebrated his sixtieth birthday at his villa in the suburbs of Budapest. His friends and political associates had made it a gala occasion, pouring through his house and bringing him presents and good wishes, thus demonstrating their continued allegiance to him and his growing political significance. This birthday celebration, the sensation of all the Budapest cafes, aroused Rakosi's determination to do something about Nagy's rising threat to his power. The Petöfi Club had already come under his suspicions; their leaders were followed by police, their telephones tapped, their letters opened, and in May a special party committee had been set up to supervise and approve in advance their activities.³⁶ (The party's apparent tolerance of the Petöfi Circle's activities may well have been in part a deliberate attempt to draw out the opposition and allow it to expose and consolidate itself so that it could be lopped off in one stroke.)³⁷ The Petöfi Circle press debate was in itself such an open and radical defiance of the regime, and its concluding demand for Nagy's return such a direct threat to Rakosi, that he determined to move drastically against the whole opposition. Then fate, it seemed to him, intervened in his favor. As the physically exhausted but emotionally revolutionary audience of the Petöfi Circle press debate left the Budapest Officers' Club, when the meeting finally broke up around 4:00 a.m. on the morning of June 28, the same approaching dawn that greeted them also saw the workers of the ZISPO factory in Poznan assembling for their planned protest march. The Poznan rising was for Rakosi the "incident" for which he

33. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

34. Aczel and Meray, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

36. TANA, pp. 56-57.

37. B. Nagy MS., pp. 27-37; Meray (interview in Paris, Sept. 5, 1960) doubts this.

had been waiting. Furthermore, the immediate and sharply hostile Soviet reaction to it was only the latest peak of a general Soviet shift in the general line on de-Stalinization which had been developing for some weeks, set off by the reactions in the Western (particularly the Italian) Communist Parties to the U.S. State Department's publication of Khrushchev's Twentieth Congress secret speech. Rakosi had every reason to believe, therefore, that he would receive Soviet support and perhaps even encouragement for his intended blow against the rebellious Hungarian writers and the activities of the Petöfi Circle. He may well have been aware of the forthcoming issuance of the Soviet Central Committee resolution of June 30, published in *Pravda* on July 2. He must also have calculated that the intensifying Soviet concern about the unfavorable results of the de-Stalinization program would counteract Tito's continuing pressure on Moscow to remove him and allow some further liberalization in Hungary.

Rákosi wasted no time. On July 1 *Szabad Nép* published a Hungarian Central Committee resolution adopted (in spite of some opposition) the previous day³⁸ which, although pledging the continuation of "socialist democratization," denounced the "anti-party manifestations" of the Petöfi Circle, declared that

Certain speakers at the latest debates of the Petöfi Circle (Dery and Tardos) have gone so far as to deny the leading role of the Party and the working class, and advocated bourgeois and counterrevolutionary views . . . exaggerated . . . mistakes committed . . . slandered party and state officials whose work has become identified with the great successes of the Hungarian People's Democracy. [i.e., Rakosi] . . . gave the appearance of standing on the platform of the 20th Congress and of Marxism-Leninism in order to conceal, in this way, their anti-party and anti-people's democratic views. . . .³⁹

criticized the press (the *Szabad Nép* by name), for not attacking these "demagogic" views:

The press failed to take a stand against the anti-party views. Certain newspapers and periodicals, on the other hand, have published misleading and unprincipled laudatory reports and occasionally even gave space to articles with provocative content. The erroneous article in the June 24 issue of *Szabad Nép* has caused confusion in several places among party members. This article failed to oppose hostile demagogic views and exaggerated certain sound traits of the debates of the Petöfi Circle. . . .⁴⁰

and stated that

The open opposition against the party and People's Democracy is mainly organized by a certain group which has formed around Imre Nagy.⁴¹

38. Tr.: *NCPREE*, pp. 328-331.

39. *NCPREE*, p. 329. (author's brackets)

40. *NCPREE*, pp. 329-330.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

Dery and Tardos were expelled from the party, others sharply warned, the Petöfi Circle leaders were ordered to make self-criticism and their meetings were temporarily suspended, and regime propaganda echoed the Central Committee charges.⁴² Rakosi tried again his usual tactic of denouncing the writers and intellectuals to the workers, but this time it did not work. The Petöfi Circle had been too well publicized among the workers; when at factory meetings they were asked to adopt resolutions condemning Dery and Tardos, they replied that they would like to know the contents of the "anti-party speeches the two had made at the June 27 meeting."⁴³

From the policy viewpoint, Gerö's speech⁴⁴ and the Plenum's final resolution⁴⁵, like Gerö's appointment itself, represented the course most surely fatal for the regime: inconclusive compromise. While less violent than the June 30 resolution against the Petöfi Circle, they were certainly much less moderate than the Nagy July 4, 1953 speech and the whole New Course developments. The resolution can best be compared, not to the Polish Party's Seventh Plenum resolution (adopted ten days later), but to the kind of program the Polish Natolin faction would have instituted had it obtained a Central Committee majority. Like the Natolin program, the Hungarian July resolution was intended to appeal to the workers and peasants by promising them a rapid and large-scale rise in the standard of living. The primarily political and cultural demands of the intellectuals were essentially rejected.

Rakosi's coup did not long endure, however; he himself was removed in July. In September, after being practically dormant during late July and August, the Petöfi Circle resumed its activities. The demands expressed, particularly in agriculture, went beyond their previous level.⁴⁶ At the meeting on agriculture, where Donath presided, Vas made only a weak defense of regime agricultural policy, while most of the speakers strongly denounced compulsory deliveries, agri-

42. "In Defense of Democracy and the Party Line," *Szabad Nep*, July 3, 1956; tr.: NCPREE, pp. 331-337; "Freedom of Criticism and Demagogy," *Szabad Nep*, July 13, 1956; Potoczky MS., pp. 41-42.

43. Fejtö, *Ungheria*, p. 201.

44. *Szabad Nep*, July 19, 1956; excerpts: *Pravda*, July 20, 1956; tr. excerpts: NCPREE, pp. 342-345 and HR, p. 33.

45. *Szabad Nep*, July 23, 1956; tr.: NCPREE, pp. 346-380. Kende (interview, Paris, Sept. 6, 1960) states that Nagy was invited to the CC during the July Plenum and informed his case would be reconsidered. His naive and euphoric feeling that he had finally won was, however, soon dissipated by Gerö's relatively uncompromising speech.

46. Debate re reestablishment of peoples' colleges (NEKOSz), Sept. 19, 1956 (*Szabad Ifjusag* and *Nepszava*, Sept. 20, 1956); re education and youth, Sept. 28, 1956 (Radio Budapest, Sept. 29, 1956, 1800 GMT); re technical development and the young intelligentsia, Oct. 10, 1956 (Radio Budapest, Oct. 11, 1900 GMT); re agriculture, Oct. 17, 1956 (Radio Budapest, Oct. 18, 0300 and 2100 GMT and *Szabad Ifjusag*, Oct. 18, 1956); vd. Nicolas Baudy, *La Jeunesse d'Octobre* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1957), p. 65.

cultural collectivization, and the heavy taxes which the peasantry had to bear. At this meeting Zoltan Tildy, the former smallholder leader who had become a regime collaborator, reappeared after eight years silence. In a miscalculation which reminds one of Lange's similar one in Poland, he strongly defended Communist agricultural policy. Seeing how badly this went down with his audience, he soon thereafter became more anti-regime and during the Revolution played a major and strongly anti-Communist role.⁴⁷ Equivalent discussion circles were set up in the provinces, to which the thaw was now rapidly spreading.⁴⁸ Even more important were the discussions at the universities, out of which the October 23 events directly sprang. These university discussion groups, meetings, and resolutions developed so rapidly and so radically, in the direction of anti-Communist, patriotic Hungarian nationalism, that the Petöfi Circle was soon behind, rather than leading, the course of the revolutionary ferment. Significantly, its resolution of October 22, the day before the outbreak of the revolution, was more moderate, less nationalistic, and less antiregime than that of the Budapest university students of the same day.⁴⁹

The Petöfi Circle, like the Writers' Association, was far from out of revolutionary developments; both of them played considerable roles during the Revolution. Nevertheless, both of them were considerably more left-wing, more prudent in considering Soviet interests in Hungary and in attempting to avoid a direct clash with them, and insufficiently patriotic, traditional, religious and nationalist to express the thoughts of the majority of the Hungarian people. Like the Polish revisionists,⁵⁰ they were caught between two extremes: the very anti-Communist ferment which they had done so much to create would have been bound to deprive them of their shortlived role of leadership, as did the Soviet intervention some of them had hoped, through moderation, to avoid. Whether one looks at it from the viewpoint of Hungarian majority public opinion or of Khrushchev and Kadar, the Petöfi Circle and the Writers' Association were the Girondins of the Hungarian Revolution.

47. Vd. Vali, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

48. Losonczy at Szolnok intellectuals' discussion, Sept. 21, 1956 in *Magyar Nemzet*, Sept. 23, 1956; Debrecen, Radio Budapest, Sept. 29, 1956, 1800 GMT; Kossuth Club in Debrecen, Radio Budapest, Oct. 14, 1956, 1900 GMT; Petöfi Circles in Keszthely and Zalaegerszeg, Radio Budapest, Oct. 20, 1956, 1400 GMT.

49. Students' resolutions: Technical University of Architecture and Economics University demands on Radio Budapest, Oct. 22, 1956, 1900 GMT; Fejtö, *Ungheria*, pp. 248-249; George Urban, *The Nineteen Days* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 29 (for the Technical University demands); Petöfi Circle resolution: *Szabad Nep*, Oct. 23, 1956; MTI in French Hellschreiber to Europe, Oct. 23, 1300 GMT; quoted from Stillman, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16. Vd. Fejtö, *Ungheria*, p. 249.

50. Vd. my "What Happened to Revisionism?," *Problems of Communism*, IX, 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1960), pp. 1-9 and "Warsaw Notebook," *Soviet Survey*, No. 35 (Jan.-Mar. 1961), pp. 26-30.

Yet surely the historian should not dismiss the Petöfi Circle so summarily. Most of its initiators and leading members had been Communists; and its development not only made them lose their faith but made a major contribution toward the process of ferment and thaw which, had the Red Army not crushed it, would probably have resulted, not in a restoration of Horthyism or fascism as Communists and their deluded, if unconscious, epigones so falsely maintain, but, for the first time in Hungary's checkered history, in an independent, neutral, democratic country. By regenerating its members, the Petöfi Circle helped mightily to regenerate its country, and thus wrote another chapter in the story of "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."⁵¹

51. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, Sept. 23, 1800.